STORIES OF IMAGINATION

FANTASTIC

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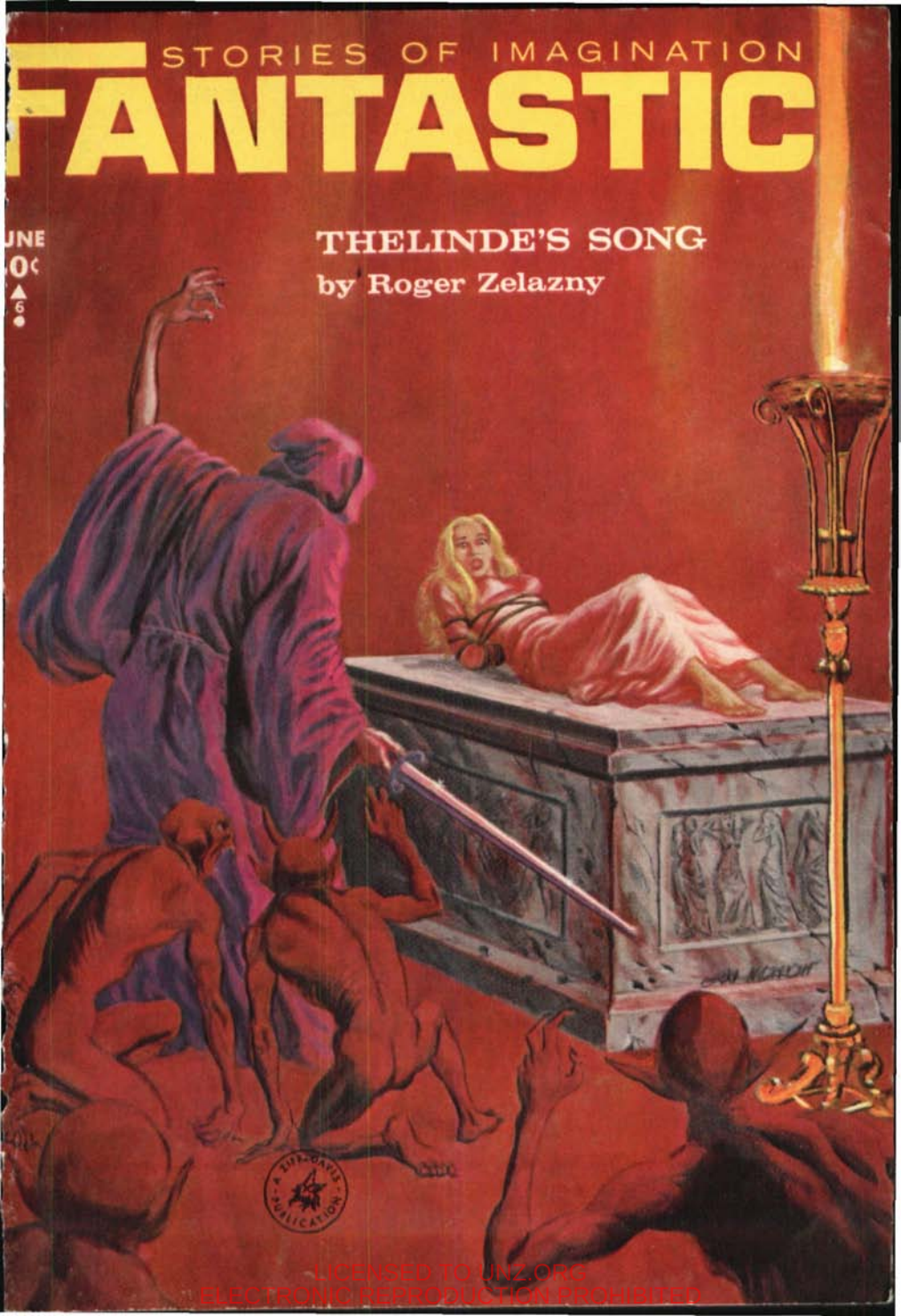
THELINDE'S SONG

by Roger Zelazny



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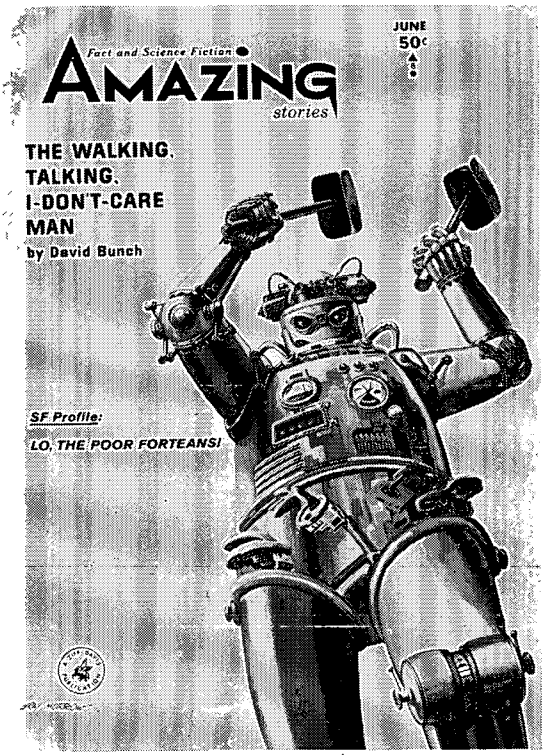

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NOVELET

THE DESTROYER
By Thomas N. Scortia 12

SHORT STORIES

THELINDE'S SONG
By Roger Zelazny 5

THE PENULTIMATE SHORE
By Stanley E. Aspittle, Jr. .. 37

PHOG
By Piers Anthony 97

SILENCE
By J. Hunter Holly 108

VIGNETTE

THE LITTLE DOORS
By David R. Bunch 95

SERIAL

THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME
By Keith Laumer 50
(Conclusion)

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Thelinde's Song

By ROGER ZELAZNY

Dilvish the Deliverer and his steel beast, Black, escaped to Dilfar (*Passage to Dilfar*, FANTASTIC, February, 1965). Now, as the witch daughter summons up demons of Jelerak, we learn more of Dilvish—the once-dead.

ACROSS the evening, on the other side of the hill, beneath a moon that was huge and golden, Thelinde was singing.

In the high were-hall of Caer Devash, rung all around with pine trees and mirrored far below its cliffs in that silver river called Denesh, Mildin could hear her daughter's voice, and the words of her song:

The Men of Westrim are hardy,
The Men of Westrim bold,
But Dilvish who was damned
came back
And made their blood run cold.

When they hounded him from
Portaroy
To Dilfar in the East,
He rode a thing he'd brought
from Hell—
A black and steel beast.

They could not cut nor turn his
mount—
The horse that Men call
Black—
For the Colonel gained much
wisdom
With the curse of Jelerak—

Mildin shuddered and fetched her shimmering were-cloak—for she was Mistress of the Coven—and throwing it about her shoulders and clasping it at her neck with the smoky Stone of the Moon, she became as a silvergray bird and passed out through the window and high above the Denesh.

She crossed over the hill to where Thelinde stood, staring South. Coming to rest upon the

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lower limb of a nearby tree, she said, through her bird-throat: "My child, stop your singing."

"Mother! What is the matter?" asked Thelinde. "Why are you come in swift-form?" And her eyes were full, for they followed the changing of the moon, and in her hair was the silver fire of the Witches of the North. She was seventeen and supple, and she loved singing.

"You have sung a Name which must not be uttered, even here in the fastness of our keep," said Mildin. "Where did you learn that song?"

"From a thing in the cave," she answered, "where the river called Midnight makes a pool as it passes on its way underground."

"What was the thing in the cave?"

"He is gone by now," Thelinde replied. "He was a dark-traveler, one of the frog-kind, I think, who rested there on his way to the Council of Beasts."

"Did he tell you the meaning of that song?" she asked.

"No, he said that it has come but recent, and it is of the wars in the South and the East."

"That is true," said Mildin, "and the frog has no fear of croaking it, for he is of the dark kind, and is of no consequence to the Mighty. But you, Thelinde, you must be more wary. All of those with power upon them, unless they be rash indeed, fear to mention that name which begins with 'J'."

"Why is that?"

The silvergray form fluttered to the ground. Then her mother was standing beside her, tall and pale under the moon; her hair was braided and twisted high upon her head into a Crown of the Coven, as it is called.

"Come with me now within my cloak, and we will go to the Pool of the Goddess, while the fingers of the Moon still touch upon its surface," said Mildin, "and you shall see something of which you have sung."

THEY descended the hill to the place where the rivulet, which begins high upon the hill at the spring, passes down with barely a ripple into their pool. Mildin knelt beside it in silence, and leaning forward she breathed upon the surface of the water. Then she summoned Thelinde to her side and they stared downward.

"Look now into the image of the moon reflected in the water," she told her. "Look deeply. Listen. . .

"Long ago," she began, "even as we reckon time, there was a House which was stricken from the peerage of the East, because several generations had intermarried with the Elf-kind. Elf-men are tall and fair to look

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upon, quick in thought and action, and though their race *is* much older, Men do not generally recognize the Elf-peerage. Pity . . . The last man of this particular House, bereft of his lands and his titles, turned his hand to many occupations, from the sea to the mountains, and finally he came into soldiery, in those first wars with the West, some several centuries ago. Then did he distinguish himself in the great Battle of Portaroy, delivering that city out of the hands of its enemies, so that he came to be called Dilvish the Deliverer. See! The picture comes now clear! It is the entry of Dilvish into Portaroy . . ."

And Thelinde stared into the pool where a picture had formed:

Tall he was, and darker than the Elf-kind, with eyes that laughed and glowed with the pride of triumph. He was mounted on a brown stallion, and his armor, though dented and scratched, still glowed in the morning sun. He rode at the head of his troops, and the people of Portaroy stood at the sides of the roadway and cheered, and the women threw down flowers before him. When he came at last to the Fountain in the Square, he dismounted and drank the wine of victory. Then the Elders gave speeches of thanks and a great open banquet was laid out for their deliverers.

"He looks to be a good man," said Thelinde. "But what a great sword he wears!—it reaches down to the tops of his boots!"

"Yes, a two-handed engine named that day Deliverer. And his boots, you will note, are of the green Elvish leather, which Men cannot buy—but which are sometimes given as a gift, in sign of favor by the High Ones—and it is said that they leave no footprints. It is a pity that within a sennight of that feast which you see spread, Deliverer should be smashed and Dilvish no longer among the living."

"But he *still* lives!"

"Yes—again."

There was a turbulence within the pool, and another picture emerged.

A DARK hillside . . . A man, cloaked and hooded, within a faintly glowing Circle . . . A girl bound upon a stone altar . . . A blade in the man's right hand and a staff in his left . . .

Mildin felt her daughter's fingers seize upon her shoulder.

"Mother! What is it?"

"It is the One you must never name."

"What is he about?"

"A dark thing, requiring the lifeblood of a virgin. He has waited since beyond time for the stars to reform themselves into the proper positions for this rite. He has journeyed far, to come to

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that ancient altar in the hills above Portaroy, to the place where the thing must be accomplished.

"See how the dark things dance about the Circle—bats and wraiths and wandering wisps—craving but a drop! They will not touch the Circle, though."

"Of course not . . ."

"Now, as the flames of that single brazier reach higher and the stars come into the correct positions, he prepares to take her life . . ."

"I cannot watch!"

"Watch!"

"It is the Deliverer, Dilvish, coming that way."

"Yes. After the manner of the High Ones, he seldom sleeps. He goes to take his air in the hills above Portaroy, wearing his full battle-trappings as people expect of deliverers."

"He sees Jel— He sees the Circle! He advances!"

"Yes, and he breaks the Circle. Being of the High Blood, he knows he has ten times the immunity of a Man to sorcery. But he does not know whose Circle he has broken. Still, it does not kill him. Yet he is weakened—see how he staggers!—so great is the power of That One.

"He strikes the wizard with his hand, knocking him to the ground, and he upsets the brazier. Then he turns to free the girl . . ."

Within the pool, the shadow that was the sorceror rose from off the ground. His face was invisible within the hood, but he lifted his staff on high. Suddenly, he seemed to grow to an enormous height, and his staff lengthened and twisted like a serpent. He reached out and touched the girl, lightly, with its tip.

Thelinde screamed.

Before her eyes the girl was aging. Wrinkles appeared on her face and her hair grew white. Her skin yellowed and her every bone grew prominent beneath it.

Finally, she stopped breathing, but the spell did not cease. The thing on the altar shriveled and a fine powder, like smoke, arose from it.

Then a skeleton lay upon the stone.

Dilvish turned on the sorceror, raising Deliverer above his shoulder.

But as he brought the blade down, the Dark One touched it with his staff and it shattered and fell at his feet. Then Dilvish advanced one step upon the sorceror.

Again the staff licked forward, and a nimbus of pale fire played about the form of the Deliverer. After a time it subsided. Still though, did he stand there, unmoving.

The picture vanished.

"What has happened?"

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"The Dark One," said Mildin, "wrought him a terrible curse, against which even the High Blood was not proof. Look now."

DAY lay upon the hillside. The skeleton lay upon the altar. The sorceror was gone. Dilvish stood alone, all marble in the sunfall, with the dew of morning upon him, and his right hand was still raised as if to smite an enemy.

Later, a group of boys came by and stared for a long while. Then they ran back to the town to tell of it. The Elders of Portaroy came up into the hills, and taking the statue as a gift of the many strange ones who were accounted friends of their Deliverer, they had it carted back to Portaroy and set up in the Square beside the Fountain.

"He turned him to stone!"

"Yes, and he stood there in the Square for over two centuries, his own monument, fist raised against the enemies of the town he had delivered. None ever knew what had become of him, but his human friends grew old and died, and still his statue stood."

". . . And he slept in stone."

"No, the Dark One does not curse that kindly. While his body stood rigid, in full battle-trappings, his spirit was banished to one of the deepest pits of Hell the Dark One could manage."

"Oh. . ."

". . . And whether the spell was meant only to be so, or whether the High Blood prevailed in a time of need, or whether some powerful ally of Dilvish's learned the truth and finally worked his release, no one knows. But one day recent, as Lylish, Colonel of the West, swept across the land, all the Men of Portaroy were assembled in the Square preparing defense of the town."

The moon had now crept to the edge of the pool. Beneath it, there came another picture:

The Men of Portaroy were arming themselves and drilling in the Square. They were too few, but they seemed intent upon selling their lives as dearly as possible. Many looked upon the statue of the Deliverer that morning, as though recalling a legend. Then, as the sun wrapped it in color, it moved. . .

For a quarter of an hour, slowly, and with apparent great effort, the limbs changed position. The entire crowd in the Square stood and watched, itself unmoving now. Finally, Dilvish climbed down from his pedestal and drank from the Fountain.

The people were all around him then, and he turned toward them.

"His eyes, mother! They have changed!"

"After what he has seen with the eyes of his spirit, is it a wonder that the outer ones reflect it?"

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The picture vanished. The moon swam further away.

". . . And from somewhere he got him a horse that was not a horse, but a beast of steel in the likeness of a horse."

For a moment a dark and running form appeared within the pool.

"That is Black, his mount. Dilvish rode him into the battle, and though he fought long on foot too, he rode him out again, much later—the only survivor. In the weeks before the battle he had trained his men well, but they were too few. He was named Colonel of the East by them, in opposition to the title Lord Lylish wears. All fell, however, save he, though the Lords and Elders of the other cities of the East have now risen in arms and they, too, recognize his rank. This very day, I have been told, he stood before the walls of Dilfar and slew Lance of the Invincible Armor in single combat. But the moon falls now and the water darkens . . ."

"But the name? Why must I not mention the name of Jelerak?"

AS she spoke it, there came a rustling sound, as of great dry wings beating at the air overhead, and the moon was obscured by a cloud, and a dark shape was reflected deep within the pool.

Mildin drew her daughter within the were-cloak.

The rustling grew louder and a faint mist sprang up about them.

Mildin made the Sign of the Moon, and she began to speak softly:

"Back with thee—in the Name of the Coven, of which I am Mistress, I charge thee return. Go back where thou camest. We desire not thy dark wings above Caer Devash."

There was a downdraft of air, and a flat expressionless face hovered just above them, couched between wide bat wings. Its talons were faintly glowing, red, as of metal just heated at the forge.

It circled them, and Mildin drew the cloak tighter and raised her hand.

"By the Moon, our Mother, in all her guises, I charge thee depart. Now! This instant! Get away from Caer Devash!"

It landed upon the ground beside them, but Mildin's cloak began to glow and the Stone of the Moon blazed like a milky flame. It drew back from the light, back within the mists.

Then an opening appeared in the cloud and a shaft of moonlight passed through it. A single moonbeam touched upon the creature.

It screamed once, like a Man in great pain, then mounted into the air heading southwest.

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Thelinde looked up into her mother's face, which suddenly appeared very tired, older . . .

"What was it?" she asked her.

"It was a servant of the Dark One. I tried to warn you, in the most graphic way possible, of his power. For so long has his Name been used in the conjuring and compelling of fell spirits and dark nights that his has become a Name of Power. They rush to find the speaker whenever they hear it uttered, lest it should be he and he should grow angry at their tardiness. If it is not he, they often seek vengeance upon the presumptuous speaker. It is also said though, that if his Name be pronounced too often by one person, then he himself becomes aware of this and sends a doom upon that person. Either way, it is not wise to go about singing such songs."

"I will not, ever. How can a sorceror be that strong?"

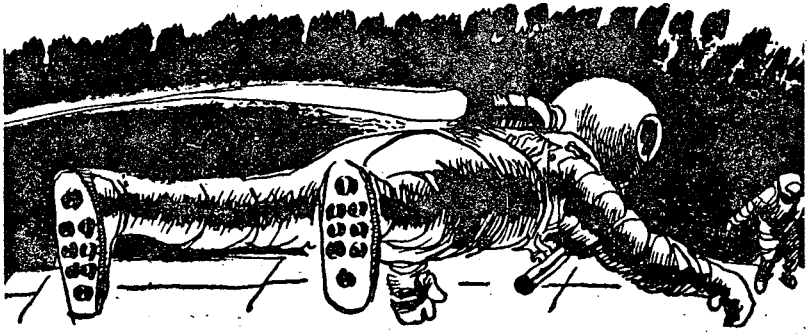
"He is as old as the hills. He was once a white wizard and he fell into dark ways, which makes him particularly malicious—you know, they seldom ever change for the better—and he is now accounted to be one of the three most powerful, possibly *the* most powerful, of all the wizards in all the kingdoms of all the Earths. He is still alive and very strong, though the story which you saw took place centuries ago. But even he is not without his problems . . ."

"Why is that?" asked the witch's daughter.

"Because Dilvish is come alive once more, and I believe he is somewhat angry."

The moon emerged from behind the cloud, and huge it was, and it had turned to fallow gold during its absence.

Mildin and her daughter headed back up the hill then, toward Caer Devash rung round with pines, high above Denesh, the silver river. **THE END**



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THE DESTROYER

By THOMAS N. SCORTIA

The boy saw the universe in a different way—a better way. Naturally, therefore, he had to be killed.

NATURALLY I have no power to compel your help," the C.B.I. man named Dilk said.

"Compel?" Anton Blackwell asked. "That's an odd word. Why should you want to compel me to do anything?"

"Oh, come off it, Doctor," Dilk said. "Don't play cat and mouse with me."

"I'm not playing anything with you," Blackwell said stiffly. "I just don't understand what you want of me. The Genetic Bank's activities are as far removed from politics as anything I know."

"Nothing in a representative state is free of politics," Dilk said leaning forward to inspect the plant growing from a brass container on Blackwell's desk. The plant had the broad separated leaves of a philodendron, but the pigmentation was a distinct cereulean.

"An experiment in copper-based chlorophyl," Blackwell said idly.

"Oh?" Dilk said.

"Yes, substitution of cuprous copper for magnesium in the modified protoporphyrin ring. The molecule is similar to the molecule in crustacean blood."

"Very pretty," Dilk said, dismissing the plant.

Very pretty, Blackwell thought. As though that was all there was to it, this careful manipulation of the plant's DNA structure that changed the whole fundamental basis of its carbohydrate biochemistry. Very easy to dismiss such a casual change in the elementary life stuff.

"I don't think I need to point out that the President has charged the C.B.I. with policing the Controlled Genetic Modification Law of 2007," said Dilk. "The feeling is pretty high about

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this, and every election invariably brings it up as a political issue."

"The Genetic Bank is as interested in preserving the valuable genetic resources of the nation as is the President," Blackwell said.

"Which means that you are morally bound to report any unusual matrices that come to your attention."

"You're implying that someone is engaged in illegal modification."

"That's too pretty a word," Dilk said, his eyes widening.

"Why, man, that's the only capital crime on the book," Blackwell said.

"It should be," Dilk said, coloring. "Meddling with the form God gave man."

"Nature does it," Blackwell said.

"Are you trying to justify . . . ?"

"No," Blackwell said. "I'm merely pointing out that natural mutation does happen."

"I want a report of any unusual genetic matrices that come to your attention."

"That's directly against my oath of office," Blackwell said.

"Your superior . . ."

"Not even the Secretary of Human Resources can change that," Blackwell said.

"We'll see," Dilk said getting to his feet.

After the man left Blackwell sat silently eyeing the philodendron and tracing the deep blue veining that laced its delicate cereulean leaves. He wondered if the man knew about Julio.

No, he thought. Julio didn't fit the pattern. He was purely an accident. No dangerous attempt to meddle with the structure of human germ plasm there.

Still, he thought, the result was much the same. Nature or man. . . . In the final analysis, it made little difference. Dilk was after something and perhaps Julio was a part of that something.

He was still brooding silently on the matter when his secretary announced a call from Sandra Macklin. In spite of himself he was surprised at the old surge of pleasure and something he had quite forgotten until that moment.

Throughout the conversation the vagrant thought of Julio and the unresolved menace of Dilk still intruded, however.

2.

ONLY a pair of kids' blocks.

But they could destroy the world.

"Those things scare me," Caniff said. He licked his seamed lower lip. "Damn, how did he do it?"

Blackwell eyed Caniff without speaking. The Director of the Retarded Children's Creche was

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pale under his swarthy skin. His eyes shifted rapidly behind glistening contact lenses. They pointedly avoided the two plastic blocks resting on the blotter of his massive desk.

Blackwell stared past the man, his eyes looking through the window behind the Director across the rolling green lawn of the administration area. The scene was a restful green with an uncluttered neatness that pleased him. To his right, protruding from a low grove of willows, he saw the pastel wall of one of the dormitories that housed the retarded children under Caniff's care.

His eyes shifted to the startling blue sky above as the distant figure of a man drifted past his vision, his dwarfed shape gliding lightly along the invisible beam of anti-gravity currents broadcast from some distant station to the west.

He watched the figure dwindle to nothingness, savoring this sudden contact with reality. He thought again of Sandy Macklin whom he would see that night, the stories of death and coldness and uncertainty which she had brought back from the Titan Colony. The stories were nothing, he realized, to the coldness and uncertainty in this very room. It was a good world they had built here on Earth, not a perfect world, but certainly a world growing toward perfection.

A world with definite, well-surveyed boundaries, a world he understood just as Sandy understood that cold world circling Saturn.

And into this tight world of his, Blackwell thought, had come a pair of children's blocks.

He knew they could destroy his world.

He rested the fingers of his right hand lightly on them. They were very ordinary blocks of murky grey magnetic plastic, each an unadorned cube about five centimeters on a side, the sort of blocks to give kids to play with to train them in visualizing mass relationships. They moved the blocks about on a play board of metal. Because the blocks were magnetized, they adherred to the ferro-metal surface. Not much to it. You couldn't expect a kid with a retarded I.Q. to do much more with them than that. Certainly you didn't expect . . .

He grasped a block in each hand and pulled. They resisetd his efforts briefly until he exerted enough force to overcome the magnetic attraction.

The sudden crackle of sparks between them startled him even though he had been expecting it. He watched the blue electrical fire crackle across the two inches separating the blocks.

"My God," Caniff said again. "How did he do it?"

Blackwell separated the blocks

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still further until they rested on the desk at the limits of his reach. The sparks still crashed across the intervening distance with undiminished fury. The acrid bite of ozone filled his nostrils.

He released the block in his left hand and it flew across the desk to strike its mate with a sharp click. The discharge ceased as they touched. The silence that followed was stifling.

"Separating them makes no difference. The discharge intensity remains the same."

"I know," Caniff said. "I took them outside two nights ago when everybody was eating. Clamped one to a tree and started walking. I stopped at five hundred yards. The discharge was as strong as ever."

"What about the kid?"

"Julio?"

"What's his background?"

"Well, his full name is Julio Lebrano. Italian parentage. Father and mother are both dead, killed on Callisto. They were with the original colony, the one that was wiped out by rock slides. She came back here on a leave to have Julio, left him with his grandparents and then went back. The grandparents applied for admission when they found he wasn't keeping up with the kids his own age."

"Any past injuries, any previous medical history?"

"Nothing. Perfectly healthy. He just can't learn. Practically moronic. Pleasant kid, though. Never gets into mischief."

Caniff laughed sourly. "Except for this," he said.

"Have you quizzed him about the blocks?"

"Lord, yes. 'Til I'm blue in the face. He either doesn't know how they work or he doesn't have the words to explain. That's why you're here. You're the expert on retardation psychology."

"This is something a retarded child dreamed up," Blackwell said in wonder. "Well," he said after a pause, "I'll have to talk with him."

"I'll get his dorm mother, Mrs. Gamble," Caniff said keying the intercom on his desk.

"Why Mrs. Gamble?" Blackwell asked. "Couldn't you . . .?"

"I'd rather not," Caniff said dropping his eyes.

Why, Blackwell thought looking at the man, he really is scared.

3.

NOW, I don't want you getting Julio upset," Mrs. Gamble said gruffly as they made ther way across the lawn.

She was a huge woman, dominating yet quite gentle. All-mother symbol, Blackwell thought.

"Don't worry," he said. "I've

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worked with children most of my adult life."

She "humphed" lustily. "So has *Mr.* Caniff," she said, stressing the "Mr."

They found him sitting on the ground at the base of a ragged hedge near one of the dorms. The hedge was brilliant with red berries and he was pulling the berries and pinching them. The berries split open, squirting seeds and juice across the grass for a distance of several yards. As they rounded the hedge a jet from one of the berries struck Blackwell on the thigh staining the skirt of his tunic and the hose underneath.

The boy Julio looked at them and at the wet spot on Blackwell's clothing and his face wrinkled in the first sign of tears. Blackwell kneeled beside him and put a hand on his thin shoulder. He took the boy's chin in his other hand and said, smiling, "It's all right, Julio."

Julio's lower lip quivered in indecision.

His skin was smooth with a deep olive color against which the whites of his eyes were brilliant. Blackwell thought that he had never seen such liquid black eyes in a child.

"Now, we're going to be friends, you and me," he said.

Julio looked at him, the deep eyes passing over his face and past his shoulder to where Mrs. Gamble was standing. Blackwell made a slight motion with his head.

"Well," Mrs. Gamble said, frowning, "if you need me I'll be over there." She motioned to where a small group of children were playing tag in the sun.

"Don't go, Gamby," Julio said.

"You can call if you want me," Mrs. Gamble said. "Now you be nice to the doctor."

Blackwell settled down beside the boy. "Do you want to know my name?" he asked.

The boy shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Names are noise," Julio said.

The answer startled Blackwell; it sounded so mature. "Then how do you know people?" he asked.

"They feel different," the boy said. "How do you know them?"

Blackwell inspected the boy for some glimmer of humor. There was none. His face was open and without emotion, with the vague emptiness of expression that he saw constantly on children like him.

Absently he plucked one of the berries from the hedge at his shoulder and squeezed the fruit as Julio had been doing. He felt the astringent wetness on his fingertips as the seeds jetted across the grass.

Julio grabbed his hand. "The men, the men," he said.

"What about the men, Julio?"

"Just like in the sky." He made

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stacatto motions with his index finger, tracing a quick line through the air.

"I saw one man awhile ago," Blackwell said.

"No, no, he was a line. Like seeds. Across the sky." Julio made the motion again, making small sharp sounds with his pursed lips.

"Like this?" Blackwell asked. He drew a curved line in a bare patch of dirt at his feet.

"No, no, this way." Julio's finger punched at the line, tracing its length with a series of small holes. "They all move that way," he said.

Then his lip quivered and he dropped his head. For moments he stared silently at Blackwell's right hand where it rested lightly on the grass. He gazed fixedly at the black wen on Blackwell's hand, his head shaking slowly from side to side.

The motion disturbed Blackwell and he withdrew the hand rubbing it lightly on the side of his tunic. "They move that way?" he asked slowly. "What way is that, Julio?"

"No, you laugh at me—like they all do."

"I won't laugh at you," he told the boy.

"They did."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Only they laughed 'cause I couldn't work the blocks. But you could feel it between them even when they weren't close together."

"Feel what?"

"That's funny," Julio said, pointing at the wen on the back of Blackwell's hand.

"You mean like a joke?"

"No. Different. It doesn't belong there."

"No."

"I felt it."

"Like the blocks?"

He bobbed his head vigorously. Then he reached out timidly to touch Blackwell's hand.

"What could you feel about the blocks, Julio?"

"What? How? From the shape."

"The shape of the blocks."

"No. Below that."

"Below?"

"The shape below . . . in the blocks. It pulls." He looked up at the sky, his black eyes wide. "It pulls all the time," the boy said.

"No matter how far apart they are?" Blackwell suggested.

"Far apart?" Julio said. "What does that mean?"

4.

WHEN he returned to Caniff's office, he asked to see Julio's file. He leafed through it briefly and said, "Looks like something's missing. The lab section isn't complete."

"Only the routine tests," Caniff said. "We're overworked

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these days with all the new kids coming in."

"Will you get a more complete run on Julio?"

Caniff nodded.

"Run a check on nitrogen balance, basal, the usual. Check protein-bound iodine in the blood and creatinine in the urine. Better run a spectrum on tyrosine and glutamic acid metabolisms." He inspected the dossier again. "I doubt if that will tell us anything," he said at last. "Can I borrow this?"

"The psych file?"

"Might pick something up in studying."

"Sure. I've got a copy."

"And the blocks too," Blackwell said. "I'll want them."

He was quite glad to leave Caniff's office. Once out on the rolling lawn, he headed for the creche's transmitting station.

He dialed the North Shore beam and stepped onto the transmitter stage. The anti-grav beam reacted with the metal thread stitched in his clothing and he soared effortlessly upward, scarcely aware of the motion. He made the necessary small corrections with his belt director and entered the North Shore beam.

He looked down as the creche grounds faded swiftly from sight. Below him the rolling landscape with its disciplined fields and ordered disorder of trees and occasional buildings swept past.

It was a lovely world, he told himself again. Warm and secure with man's mark forever on the land. The mark was camouflaged with the knowledge of a century of bending nature to his bidding, but it was there nonetheless. A most ordered world inhabited by a most ordered people.

IN a way he could appreciate the fanaticism of people like Dilk who saw underneath this order the ever-present menace of the very technology upon which this world was built. The brief war of 1990 had destroyed the Asiatic hegamony that had inherited the power and prestige of the Chinese People's Republic and forever eradicated the fantastic beehive society that the upper party echelon had created. The new techniques of controlled mutation that an advanced science of molecular biology had developed would have been lost in that holocaust which destroyed a continent had not the devastation on the North American continent been so widepread. Only those selfsame techniques could develop the plants, however, that eventually survived in the radioactive wastelands and concentrated the very poisons that killed lesser plants and finally brought about the detoxification that allowed man to reclaim the land once again.

The fear of another society

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based on the warping and tailoring of the human form still infected this world, Blackwell knew; it infected the world to such a degree that, in a society where even murder brought not punishment but hospitalization, the mere tampering with human genetic make-up was a capital crime without appeal.

It *was* a most ordered world, Blackwell knew, with a people ordered and civilized and confident of their place in God's creation. Chaos, if it existed in their philosophy, existed only past the boundaries of the earth's atmosphere in the cold and bleak worlds that man could never inherit because of his physical limitations and his unwillingness to change those limitations.

He wondered what chaos a thing like the tiny toy blocks could unleash. Insignificant, but no science of man's could treat them, and that was frightening.

It frightened Caniff, he was sure of that. Beyond the basic liberal arts courses he had taken in school the man knew nothing of the sciences. He suspected instinctively that the behavior of the blocks meant more than a sudden new phenomenon to be observed. They violated basic laws, like the inverse square law, for instance, and the conservation of energy and matter.

You could see the fear on Caniff's face when he talked about the blocks. To him the scientific laws that he knew were eternal verities, not to be questioned. The blocks rocked the very foundations of his world which he had built on a faith engendered by the years of success of the physical sciences in mastering nature.

Well, the damned things scared him too. He wasn't a physicist but he could see their threat. The big difference between him and Caniff, he told himself, was that he had been trained to accept data without prejudice. Sure, it was frightening, but it had to fit into some rationale. If the theory wouldn't account for the data, you discarded the theory. That would be chaos to Caniff.

He made a mental note to watch the Administrator closely during the next few days. Frightened men are dangerous to others, but most of all they are dangerous to themselves.

He phased from the North Shore beam to drop the blocks at Research Associates, a consulting lab that had done work for him before. He gave careful instructions on what he wanted, refused pointedly to answer questions on the origin of the blocks, and left. He returned to the North Shore beam and continued on his way.

TWENTY minutes later he drifted downward on the signal broadcast from his house.

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He showered quickly and, seeing that he still had some forty-five minutes before he was due to meet Sandy, he decided on a massage.

As the machine's elastic pseudopods gently rubbed and kneaded his tired muscles, he watched the reading lantern project pages from Julio's psychiatric file on the ceiling over his head.

There were the usual data: twelve electrode encephalograph charts, Rorschach tests, line-point associations, basic I.Q., and specialized variations thereof.

He allowed the lantern to leaf through the results of the Rorschach tests, noting the detailed responses recorded for the various ink blots. He realized as he watched that the boy's responses were completely atypical. Sometimes his interpretations of the blots were as prosaic as bread and butter. At other times, they seemed completely divorced from reality. There was the blot with four axes of symmetry and eight bulbous arms protruding from a solid mass. The examiner had noted: "Motor . . electric, intern. comb., at., no distinction. Must be of metal."

The same pattern repeated itself twice more in the series, and after the pattern were listed the comments: "Dirt, hill, like in back of dorm." Blackwell closed his eyes for a moment. Yes, he remembered the hill back of the creche dorm. The sedimentary rock was exposed in decaying layers. The white rock, he remembered was streaked with red. Metal again, he thought. Rust streaks on rock.

And the third entry opposite the third appearance of the pattern: "Blocks, magnetic blocks, no other kind, specific here." Blackwell shook his head. There was a pattern, he felt, but it did not make sense. The associations were objective rather than subjective as in the usual Rorschach.

The lantern flipped to the basic I.Q. The test was an impossible mess. Julio's final score was 15. The math section was the worst. There, for simple addition problems, he had given multiple answers. Perhaps they hadn't read the questions to him correctly, Blackwell thought, but he immediately discounted that. To Julio, 1 plus 2 was equally zero, one, three, and sixteen.

He was about to leave the table when the advanced I.Q. section flashed on the ceiling. Why they had given the test to such an obviously retarded child, he did not know. The test was usually given to those children whom the examiner suspected were so superior that they seemed disoriented and had been taken as retarded. They'd probably given Julio the test as a matter of routine.

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The math section started with a simple explanation of algebraic manipulations with examples afterwards to test the examinee's comprehension. The test proceeded slowly to more complicated forms. Julio had failed to comprehend any of the problems placed before him except for one group.

"Bedamned!" Blackwell swore aloud.

The kid couldn't add one and two, or do the simplest of first degree equations. Yet in three distinct instances he had solved simultaneous equations.

And, if the time the examiner had placed by the answers was correct, in less than four seconds each.

5.

HE rode the beam to the Naval Hospital where Sandy was billeted. She was waiting on the landing.

She wrinkled her nose at him when he said, "No waiting? Titan does wonders for its women."

"They kicked me out before lights-out," she said and linked her arm with his. There was a soft brush of fragrant hair against his cheek and they were air-born.

"French village!" she shouted when she saw where they were going. "What a perfect doll you are to remember."

"Sure," he said as they settled to the narrow, dimly-lighted street before the transmitter. "A natural romantic, that's me."

Moments later they were seated in a gilded wood pavilion while stars peaked through peppermint-striped ribbons of canvas that formed the roof overhead. A waiter served them cocktails, took their order, then silently withdrew.

Blackwell sipped his martini slowly and then reached out to take her hand where it rested on the table.

"Let's see," he said. "How long has it been?"

"Five . . . no, six years." Her voice was husky, vibrant. He admired its timbre for seconds and then squeezed her hand as he realized what must be rseponsible for that throaty depth.

It was as though she had read his thoughts. "Let's not get morbid," she said.

"What about . . . ?"

"This?" She pointed at her throat. "No dice."

"Which means?"

"It'll kill me, worse luck."

WHO would have suspected, he thought. You would suppose that Venus, for instance, would have fungi dangerous to man. But Titan? The stuff had apparently lain there for centuries in spore form, waiting for the proper conditions of moist-

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ness, warmth, and saline concentration. There weren't many cases, but those that developed had a high incidence of fatality. In Sandy's case the heavy fungoid growth surrounded her larynx and trachea. Apparently it had already entered the blood stream and taken up growth in other parts of her body.

"It surrounds the venous network," she said. "They can operate to relieve the pressure, but it's no good."

They sat in silence for long moments.

"Oh, come on," she said. "It's a beautiful night."

"Marry me," he said.

"Again? Once burned, twice shy. That should be you."

"Uh, uh. I mean it."

"Pity?"

"Don't be silly. A sense of immediacy thought."

"It won't work . . . any more than it did before."

"The physicist and the molecular biologist," he said jokingly. "The extrovert and the introvert."

"We think differently," she said. "That's why I went off to Titan."

"I can change."

She shook her head. "No. You'd have to become a fighter and you can't."

"Even if I try?"

"I'm stronger than you. I don't want to dominate my man. You don't feel the need for a battle the way I do."

"What's there to fight?"

"I can't tell you," she said. "You stayed here. The battle mankind is fighting isn't here anymore."

"Look," she said, "some people like me are made to strike out in new directions. In the old days, it was the men who went off looking for the new frontiers. We women have a hand in it now. You wouldn't understand what it is to give up this slow leisurely life to battle a hostile world."

"We're not stagnating," he said.

"No one said you were. But you're working out the details of perfection here. That bores me. I want to knock over the structure and build something on top, something that'll strive to a new, a higher perfection."

"What has that to do with you and me?"

"Well, the basic difference in attitudes shows why it won't work for us. That's why, day after tomorrow, after they've cut out what part of this they can, I'm going back."

"You can't do that," he said.

"Do you want me to stay and die in your world or go out fighting in mine?"

"I want you to stay."

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it. Let's change the subject."

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HE began to tell her about Julio. For some reason she said nothing when he finished with the description of the blocks.

"Well?" he said.

"You're right, of course. They don't appear to obey the physical laws we know."

"The kid doesn't make sense. He's a near moron."

"Perhaps. The ink blot you mentioned. Could you draw a rough picture for me?"

He found a notebook in his breast pocket and carefully drew the blot as he remembered it.

She inspected it closely in the half-light, turning it slowly around. "Metal," she said. "And the blocks are nothing but plastic with magnetized metal particles buried in them. Seems to fit."

"How so?"

"Well, the blot. It's not exact, of course, but highly suggestive. You know, when you work with the statistical equations of an atom, you never try to visualize them. Actually, you could draw a sort of surface with a thickness which represents the volume in which electrons are most probably found even when you can pinpoint the position of the individual electron. You could do this for every particle and for every atom. It's like saying the particle exists diffused through the volume you draw."

"I know that, but what . . ."

"What has this to do with your blot? Just by chance, it looks like the cross-section of the electron surface for the outer shell of one in several metals. In this case," she said, "probably iron."

"That's insane!"

"Of course, it could be cobalt or nickel or another transition element. From the tests, I'd say iron. He probably visualizes it better than we can."

"You talk as if the kid knew atomic physics."

"'Know' might not be the word," she said. "'Perceive' might be a better one."

"That's a little wild."

"No," she said. "I've seen two kids like him before. On Titan. They caused a lot of trouble."

"Trouble?"

"It was hushed up," she said, "but things kept happening."

"Things?"

"Equipment failure. Instruments lost calibration. There was a pile blow-up."

"Where are the kids now," he asked breathlessly. "I've got to know."

She licked her lips. "Sometimes you have to do things you don't like. Titan Colony hangs onto life by a thread."

"Oh, God," he said.

"There was no other way," she said.

The conversation had settled like a pall upon them. They ate their dinner in silence and she

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asked him to take her back. They landed on the Naval Hospital stage and he said good night.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," she said, taking his hand.

"That's all right," he said.

"Maybe next time?"

"Will there be one?"

She avoided his eyes and looked down at his hands.

"I'm glad you got rid of that," she said. "It was ugly."

"Rid of what?" he said.

"The mole on your hand," she said.

He looked down. Even in the dim light of the stage he saw that the wen on his right hand was gone.

There was not even the sign of a surgical scar.

6.

HE settled quickly onto the darkened creche stage and struck out across the lawn toward the administration building. There was a light in Caniff's office, and when he pushed through the door the man looked up from the file he was studying.

It was Julio's file, Blackwell noticed.

Caniff's eyes were haggard and sunken.

"Where's the boy?" Blackwell demanded.

"Asleep." Caniff passed a tired hand over his eyes.

"Wake him."

"I can't, it's against the rules."

"Damn the rules. This is important."

He told Caniff about the wen while the man fumbled with a stylus on his desk and refused to look at him.

"You know that doesn't mean anything," Caniff said at last. There was a note of uncertainty in his voice.

"Doesn't it?"

"Suggestion, hypnosis can do the same thing. That's been demonstrated. The old milkweed cures by the dark of the moon."

"Sure," Blackwell said. "The capillary circulation withdraws from the growth and it dies, falls off. Simple, if you understand it."

"Well, there you are." Caniff looked relieved.

"That takes days, though," Blackwell said. "And it leaves a scar." He waved his unblemished right hand under the director's eyes. "No amount of suggestion can do that."

"It's not much . . ."

"Sure, a small clue. Like the barely-measureable deflection of a light ray around a sun. They both mean a hell of a lot though. Get the kid," Blackwell said.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Gamble ushered Julio into the room. He seemed wide awake.

"Remember me, Julio?" Blackwell asked.

The boy nodded. "I was awake. I was expecting you."

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"Did you make the mole go, the one on my hand?"

"Wasn't that right?" the boy asked.

"Did you?"

"I wanted to help."

"How?"

The boy made rubbing motions in the air. "It was a picture," he said uncertainly.

"Damned nonsense," Caniff said coming from behind his desk.

"Keep still," Blackwell snapped. "What about a picture, Julio?"

"Everything's pictures," the boy said. "All crowded together. You can rub one out. You know." His voice quivered uncertainly.

"Like a pattern," Blackwell said breathlessly. "Is that what you mean? A pattern in space?"

"They're all crowded together. It's just the way you look."

"My God, shut up!" Caniff said. His voice was strained.

"Don't interrupt," Blackwell said.

"Shut your damned little mouth!" Caniff yelled. He was standing by the boy. His eyes were wide and frightened. Almost automatically he drew back his hand and aimed a blow at the boy's face.

Mrs. Gamble moved forward suddenly with the ponderousness of a tank. Very little could have stopped her vengeful charge.

What did happen halted her in mid-stride.

Blackwell felt tight fingers of hysteria clutch at his throat. He almost screamed aloud.

Caniff and the boy were barely a yard apart. As the blow started to descend, something happened. The intervening distance stretched insanely like a piece of rubber.

Nothing seemed distorted. But for an instant, Caniff was tens of yards from the boy and the blow slapped harmlessly against the air.

In the next instant Caniff had collapsed to the floor and the boy was backing away, tears streaming from his eyes.

Caniff pushed himself to a sitting position and looked at the weeping boy. "Oh, my God," he said. "My God!"

7.

AFTER a very frightened and angry Mrs. Gamble had shepherded the weeping Julio to his dormitory, Blackwell said, "What the hell's got into you?"

Caniff rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Leave me alone."

"You'd better get off this emotional binge or you'll be needing professional help," Blackwell said.

"Meaning I'm going off my rocker? Well, you listen to me. Those blocks were only a beginning. That kid's a focal point for disaster."

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"You're being a little melodramatic, aren't you?"

"Maybe. What would you say if I told you he ruins clocks?" Caniff asked.

"How?"

"There's a pendulum clock in the dorm. You know how we decorate the sleeping quarters in various periods. Well, Julio's been fooling with this and now it won't keep time."

"You're making a mountain out of . . ."

"Out of a molehill. Very original observation. What happens when a pendulum's period varies with each swing? Is that a molehill?" He slapped the desk viciously. "The radius of swing and length of arc and the acceleration of gravity control the period. Forgetting friction, if the first two don't vary, the third must."

"Which means," Blackwell said, "that within the pendulum case the acceleration of gravity is variable."

"Which can easily be demonstrated," Caniff said thinly. "Just reach in and drop a few pebbles and watch what happens. Which is exactly what I did," he said.

8.

WHEN Blackwell entered the house, he felt the sudden weight of fatigue on his muscles. He slept briefly, his dreams peopled by amorphous phantoms that moved in a world that melted about them like wax on a hot-plate.

He awoke with a start, brought his wrist watch to his ear, and discovered that he had slept barely two hours. He rose, showered, breakfasted from a warm-pak, swallowed a vago-amphetamine capsule. As the stimulant began to work he felt new strength flow into his body.

He called the Naval Hospital and chatted briefly with Sandy. She spoke with forced cheerfulness of the operation which she was to undergo within two hours, but he could tell that she was uneasy.

He found his high-altitude suit, checked the solar battery which energized the warming coils, donned the one-piece suit, and then waited for five minutes until the battery for his turbo-mask was charged. He left the transmitter stage of his house and, by a series of mid-air beam transfers, finally entered the south-bound gulf beam.

He could not put the conversation with Sandy out of his mind, and the poignant sorrow that he had always connected with any thought of her.

He remembered that long year they had spent together. Even after her basic restlessness had caused them to grow apart he had still loved her with a kind of

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quiet intensity which she could see but not understand. The strange thing, he thought, was that basically they were not a great deal different in spite of what Sandy had said the previous night. But he had learned to control his impatience with life. You had to in dealing with people. The discipline of his profession had imposed a restraint on the earlier daring of his youth. He could appreciate the impulse that had driven Sandy out to the Titan colony, that had made her life a restless search for something important, for something still worth doing in a world whose major activity was the smoothing of the last rough edges of comfortable life.

Perhaps this discipline of his had been wrong. Perhaps life would have been more exciting, have meant more if he had obeyed the romantic impulses of his life as had Sandy. No, he thought, it wasn't that he could not meet a challenge as Sandy had accused. It was, rather, that unlike her, he could recognize, without deluding himself, that no challenge existed. Not the planets, for they were a dead end, a mere luxury to tempt the restless soul of this generation. Nor the stars, which were still generations away.

He breathed a silent prayer, knowing that prayers were too late for Sandy.

TWENTY miles north of Raleigh, Carolina District, he left the gulf beam and made his way into the local transit beam. Raleigh was a scattering of low stone buildings in a mosaic of trees and clipped lawns. Most of the buildings were devoted to hemisphere administration functions, particularly those of the Monetary Exchange Authority and the Naval Department.

He found the Naval Sub-bureau of Colonial Affairs and took the beam lift to the Records Section.

"I'm sorry," the girl in charge of the Section said, "but the Titan records are classified."

"Look," he said, "I'm with the Department of Human Resource's Genetic Bank. You can check my classification."

"I can let you talk to Lieutenant Hayes," she said.

The Lieutenant eyed Blackwell from the intercom screen with self-conscious sterness. "You must understand, Doctor," he said, "that the mere possession of a required classification does not entitle you to access to information."

"I think some information in your Titan records may have bearing on a case of mine. Perhaps we can help each other."

The Lieutenant studied him for a moment. "Hold on," he said and cut the connection. His image returned to the screen min-

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utes later. "I'll instruct the librarian to give you all the assistance you need," he said.

After Blackwell had retired to a viewing room, he keyed the closed scanner for the information he wanted. He tried several categories before he found the information on the children Sandy had mentioned.

The cold impersonal reports through their jargon of officialese told a frightening story. There had been two children in four years. Each had been declared sub-normal and provisions for returning them to earth on the bi-yearly relief ship had been made.

In each case the children had, on preliminary commitment examination, shown certain anomalous test behaviors. In each instance, before the ship arrived, the children had begun to demonstrate unusual talents. It was not that they consciously exerted the power they controlled. It was simply that startling things began to happen.

One report from a psychologist of the colony commented on the play psychology of the children. He suggested that the "let's pretend" impulse was the basis of the disasterous failures of gravity equipment, of power sources, the explosion of an auxiliary power pile, that in some fashion they had caused the malfunctions.

Blackwell read this report several times. Emerging from the cautious language of the psychologist were two conclusions. The man hated to say what he was saying, that was obvious, but he did say it: The children each followed processes of reasoning which he did not understand.

"Those instances," Blackwell read, "wherein the examinee arrived at the test answer, he did so in a matter of seconds and by routes of reasoning which the examiners could not apprehend."

He remembered Julio's solution of the simultaneous equations and his failure with the first degree ones. It was as though his mind worked along several channels simultaneously but was incapable of coping with a simple point-to-point logical sequence.

The second conclusion of the report was veiled and circumlocutious. The essence of it was that the children did not have fixed concepts of space and time, that they were not even able to accept reality.

The single thread which ran through all the reports from the Titan Colony Staff was that the children thought in logical patterns completely unhuman and that their view of reality was completely divergent from the norm. The horrifying thing was that where their attention

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touched some facet of their environment, that facet ceased to follow the predictable laws of physics.

A report and a short letter completed the file. The report detailed the end of the children. They had been too young to really protect themselves and were dangerous. Even as his emotions revolted against what had happened to them, Blackwell realized that the Titan people had had no choice, especially after the pile explosion.

The letter was signed by the Chief of the Naval Department. "There is no doubt," the letter said, "that the destruction of the subjects was the wisest course. Other data available to this office confirms this. Similar policies have been recommended by higher authorities whenever such deviants are encountered."

And that was it. "Deviants," the Naval Chief had said. Well, it followed, Blackwell realized. Julio's parents were from the colonies. Maybe it was the hard radiation of outer space. Whatever the case, the boy was no longer quite human. He carried about him an aura that bred disaster. The blocks were only the beginning.

My God, he thought, what if this ordered universe of ours, all our precise sciences are mere reflections of our own desire for order? What if there was a higher order of reality that only people like Julio could see and manipulate? It was too easy to take a small group of observations and get a false picture of the larger workings of the universe. One could take a section of a circle and treat it as a straight line. Maybe that's what they had been doing, all those generations of searchers since Galileo and Newton, examining the straight line with an ant's eye, completely unaware that the line they treated was the merest segment of some vaster more complex geometry.

He erased the scanner and stepped from the room. The girl was waiting for him.

"Will you come with me?" she said.

He stepped through the door indicated and felt it slide shut behind him. The small man in the plaid tunic sitting on the edge of the desk looked up.

"I thought I'd better come down here to see you," Dilk said.

"What do you mean?"

"You've seen the policy on these kids," Dilk said. "I warned you about our interest. I asked for your help. Now, where is he?"

9.

IT seemed too easy, Blackwell thought as he entered the high altitude beam. The man Dilk was no fool. Still the explanation did sound simple:

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Sandy Macklin, back from Titan, had told him about the children. She'd be censured for a violation of security, of course. He had been fascinated by the tale; after all, abnormal children were his specialty. He'd taken advantage of his previous work for the Naval Department to satisfy his curiosity.

Pat.

Perhaps too pat.

But Dilk had seemed satisfied and had let him go.

When he finally entered his house he found a letter in the mail chute. It was the report from Research Associates on the toy blocks. The letter was short and impersonal. A potential of 7,000 volts had been measured between the blocks. Under this potential, a spark might jump perhaps an inch, a little more under higher humidity, but certainly not five hundred yards. Photometric and thermodynamic studies indicated no decrease in intensity with distance. Likewise, statistical discharge counts. There was absolutely no decrease in potential during the discharge. There was no possible source for the energy being expended.

Chemical analysis of the blocks revealed nothing unusual. The plastic was a common halosilicone, one known for years. The metal particles were ordinary magnetized alnico alloy. Unfortunately, after a tenth of a gram sample had been cut from the corner of one of the blocks, the discharge had ceased. The blocks were still magnetized, but not indistinguishable—except for the missing tip—from a thousand others like them.

Scribbled across the bottom was a note from the research head whom Blackwell knew. "Tony, where the blazes did you get those things? They're impossible!"

Impossible, to be sure. Impossible enough to wreck the world man knew. This whole wonderful, crazy world that was built on fundamental basics. The search for zero, someone had called it. That's what they had been doing all these years, trying to find a stable absolute in a wilderness of relativity. They'd settled for second best and built their science on it. The speed of light in a vacuum they'd called an absolute, but they knew that wasn't true. The basic units of matter, of energy, all the measurements upon which their science had been built, stemmed from arbitrary zeros. And they had used those zeros to impose an order upon the universe, an order that was false.

Well, maybe man's mind *was* the measure of all things. But it was the limit of things too. And they had limited their universe, their reality, until now the real picture destroyed them the way

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sunlight destroyed things that had lived their lives in the dark.

He could see now why Caniff acted as he did. It was an impossible thing to face. Better to destroy the source of the infection, destroy Julio and all those like him, better to run away . . .

Into insanity . . . into unreality . . .

Only . . .

THE chime of the communicator startled him from his reverie. He activated the screen and waited for the white-clad woman to speak.

"Dr. Blackwell?"

"Yes."

"I'm Dr. Edith Pitchel. Naval Hospital. Could you come over immediately?"

His heart seemed to stop.

"It's Miss Macklin," the woman said. "She asked to see you."

"The operation . . ."

"There's been no operation," Dr. Pitchel said. "She suffered an embolism fifteen minutes ago. A shred of fungoid growth in an artery. It's stopped the arterial flow to an arm, but it probably won't stop there. If it breaks loose and travels to the heart I'm afraid . . ."

For a moment he felt sick. Then the excitement of the idea seized him. Daring, yes; but what other choice was there?

"Let me speak to her," he demanded.

"I don't know if she should."

"It can't hurt her if I don't excite her."

A moment later Sandy's face, framed by white sheets, was visible. He told her what he wanted. "Game?"

She nodded.

"Give me that doctor of yours."

Dr. Pitchel protested, of course. He lied fantastically. He had an M.D. also, which helped.

"I won't be responsible."

"She wants it that way."

"Very well, but over my official protest."

He cut her short and dialed Caniff. The chime sounded six times before Mrs. Gamble answered.

"Listen," he said, "get Julio ready in beam clothes. I'm coming to get him and . . ."

Suddenly the woman was crying. "You've got to stop them," she sobbed. "My Julio . . ."

"What's wrong with Julio?"

"Those men, and now Mr. Caniff. . . . I think he's gone crazy."

"What's wrong?" he shouted.

"In the woods. They've driven him into the woods and . . . It's like a nightmare, like last night with everything twisting and changing. . . . They've got guns."

"Gamby," he practically screamed the words, "who's got guns?"

"A lot of men . . . that little

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one they call Dilk. He says he wants to kill my Julio."

10.

MRS. Gamble met him as he jumped from the beam stage.

"The hill north of the 'teen dorm," she said breathlessly. "The one where the rain has washed away the dirt so you can see the rock layers. They've got him trapped in the woods on top."

He nodded and began to run across the lawn. She followed with surprising speed. The administration buildings dropped behind and he rounded the hedge where he had first met Julio. He could see the outcropping of white rock and the 'teen dorm at its base.

"Left," Mrs. Gamble gasped.

His feet sank into the soft lawn making him stumble. They were running up a slope now and he had to slacken his speed.

"What about Caniff?" he panted. "Why didn't he stop them? They have no authority here."

"I don't know," she said. "Something's wrong. Julio had some more blocks, like the ones he took from him before." Her breath made ragged sounds in her throat. "He wanted Julio to teach him how to do something with them. He made me leave, but I heard him shouting. A little later the men came. He told the one named Dilk they should kill Julio."

That wasn't necessary, Blackwell thought, not after what he had read in the Titan file.

He could see the grove of trees as they breasted the slope of the hill. "How did he know to call Dilk in?" he asked.

"He didn't," Mrs. Gamble said. "He was surprised to see them."

How stupid can you get? Blackwell thought. He hadn't remembered until this moment: He had told the Lieutenant in the records section that he had a case similar to the ones on Titan. Dilk had been clever. He knew that direct questioning would yield nothing. He'd merely checked back on Blackwell's activities for the last few days. The sudden appearance at the Children's Creche, the interview with Julio. Simple as two plus two.

"Wait here," he told Mrs. Gamble.

He could hear shouting now and he raced on, circling the small grove of trees. There was no sign of men until he passed a leg of undergrowth and he saw them.

They were gathered in a small group waving their hands and shouting. Their heads were turned upwards.

In the half-dusk he could see a man's figure suspended above the group.

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The man was Caniff, and he was screaming soundlessly.

And he was rising all the while.

Blackwell recognized Dilk and ran to him. He grabbed the agent and yelled, "What the hell are you doing with a beam transmitter here?"

"Damn it," the man snarled, "it's not a beam. It's the kid."

Caniff was already at least a hundred yards up.

Then they could hear him. He was screaming, "No, no, no," over and over again.

"What happened?"

"He followed the kid. We found him like this when we got here," Dilk said.

"You and your damned killers."

"What about your midget killer in the woods?"

Blackwell grabbed the man by the shoulders. "Look, if you'll lay off, maybe I can get to him and stop all this."

"You're doing the talking."

Blackwell told him about Sandy.

"Are you crazy? Give that thing a chance to get loose?"

"That's my deal," Blackwell snapped. "I get Caniff down and get Julio out for you in return for that. You don't stand a chance otherwise."

Dilk paused in indecision. "All right," he said at last.

"Don't get any ideas about changing your mind after the dirty work is done."

"I'll hold off . . . if you can control the kid."

HE left Dilk and started into the woods. He could still hear Caniff screaming as the trees closed above him and hid the man from sight.

He began to call Julio's name. Dusk was heavy among the trees and he saw dark shapes behind every tree. For the first time he realized that he didn't feel the assurance he'd pretended before Dilk.

"Julio, I've got to talk to you," he called.

And the boy suddenly seemed to materialize a yard from him.

"Are you all right?"

Julio nodded. "I won't go with them," he said. "They can never touch me."

"Listen," Blackwell said, "I think I know something about you. I think you can tell if I'm lying."

"Yes. That and other things."

Blackwell began to speak earnestly.

"I can see her," Julio said. "She is very pretty."

"Are you ready?"

"Then let's go." He took the boy's hand and they started back.

They stepped into the open about twenty yards below Dilk's group. Blackwell walked to them, Julio beside him.

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The four men whirled and Dilk gestured with his gun.

"Get away, Blackwell."

"You're a fool, Dilk. He can stop you as easily as if that thing were a toy."

Dilk's hand wavered. "Get Caniff down," he said finally.

"He must do that himself," Julio said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Blackwell asked.

"I didn't want to teach him," Julio said in a small voice. "But he would have hurt Gamby. So I had to. First the blocks." He pulled another set of the plastic blocks from his pocket. "Like the first. But he wouldn't believe, even after he did it. He can't believe and he has to believe."

"We don't have any deal about this," Dilk said coldly. He turned and began to fire at Caniff's struggling figure.

"You bloodthirsty moron!" Blackwell shouted and knocked his gun arm down. The other men started firing.

"Caniff," Blackwell shouted, "Julio says you're doing it yourself. Get away, man, while you can."

"No," the man shouted down at him. "No, it's wrong. There's a beam. There has to be a beam."

"There is no beam."

Caniff's voice was suddenly dull and wooden. "No beam?"

"You're doing it."

He may have screamed. Blackwell wasn't sure. In an instant he was pushing Dilk and Julio back as Caniff's distance-dwarfed figure ballooned swiftly.

The body made a dull sound like a ripe melon hitting concrete.

11.

DILK called it "protective custody," but it was arrest none-the-less. Blackwell, Julio, and Mrs. Gamble left the Creche with Dilk and two of his men. They used magnetic grapples to make sure that no one could escape by jumping to another beam. The fourth agent Dilk left behind to attend to the details of organizing a security block around the Creche, fending off newsmen, and disposing of a shapeless mass of dead tissue that was barely recognizable as the Director of the Retarded Children's Creche.

When they touched stage at the Naval Hospital, Dilk said, "I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

"Did you have a choice?" Blackwell said.

A frightened looking Dr. Pitchel—she looked even more masculine to Blackwell than when he had talked to her earlier—led them down the echoing hall to a wall-appointed solarium. Sandy was lying in the white bed, her eyes closed, her breathing barely noticeable.

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"Wait outside," Blackwell told Dilk.

"That's out."

"I won't guarantee a thing if you don't."

"So help me," Dilk said, "if you let that kid get away, I'll kill you."

"And get away with it," he added as he motioned his men, Mrs. Gamble, and Dr. Pitchel to the door.

As the door hissed shut, Blackwell said, "All right, Julio."

"No."

"But you said . . ."

"I want you to do it. You should. It's better that way."

He felt Julio's small hand close to his. A distant part of his mind wondered at the assurance of the boy, his new ability to cope with the adults in this life of his.

"You have to notice the other world when it forces itself on you," a voice said. He realized that Julio's lips had not moved.

And the pictures flooded him then, all the strange concepts, the distorted way of looking at things. Only the distortion was not really there. It was his past view that had been distorted. He was physically dizzy then, standing on the brink of a universe that was so much vaster than the one he knew. Not vast, actually, because there was no such thing as space. Just myriad patterns existing in a mass of formlessness that could assume form, that molded itself to the way you thought.

"And this," he heard Julio's boy-man voice say, "is what you have lived in all your life."

"If I could have seen it," Blackwell said.

"All right, now," Julio said.

And he reached out, feeling. There was no distance between him and her white-framed form. There was actually no integument, no distinct boundaries to her body. It depended on your way of seeing. He found the fungus in her throat and erased it, pushed it back into the formlessness from which it had come.

But not before he had identified the strong concentration of iodine that it needed for growth. It was rather like adjusting an inner eye to a new spectrum, searching for the bands characteristic of the halide, then searching the body for those minute deposits of iodine. He found the one blocking the circulation of the arm. He found the small masses making their way to the heart. He found the mass slowly blocking circulation to the medula.

And it was over.

"Listen," he told her. "You'll be fine when you awake. But you won't return to Titan. Not until I can talk with you. Then perhaps . . ."

He left it unsaid and let her sleep.

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HE reached out past the walls, found Dilk and his men. It was easy to strip a few electrons from the valence shell of sulfur where it bound certain proteins in the sleep centers to cause a local ionization. One by one they collapsed in a coma which would last for days.

"Not Gamby," Julio said. "Please, not Gamby."

He passed over her and sent his wave of sleep sweeping through the hospital staff.

Then they walked into the corridor where Mrs. Gamble's stolid figure stood occulting the light from the window behind her.

"There's nothing else I can say," she said. "Just take good care of Julio."

"I will," he said.

"I don't know what's happened. I might guess, but . . . well, I don't care for myself."

"For Julio?" he said. "Even if he is the monster Dilk said? Even if he can bring the whole world of ours crashing down on us?"

"Well, that wouldn't be easy. But I'm a lot older than you. I've lived through the changes that led to this world."

"Good bye, Gamby," Julio said.

They stepped past her to the window which opened before them. They moved swiftly out over the sprawling hospital, over the forests and the lakes and the ordered fields.

They paused above the rank growth that covered lower Manhattan Island.

Well, there had been other changes, Blackwell thought, remembering the chaos that the atom had made of the world.

But to destroy it all again . . .

Maybe Dilk was right. Maybe he should kill the boy.

But there would always be others. That had been demonstrated.

All this great ponderous pyramid of knowledge, now useless. All those myriads of faceless men in the laboratories of the centuries scribbling data into notebooks, valueless data because they had started from the wrong premise, the wrong zero.

He took the plastic blocks from his pocket while Julio stood silently beside him.

A child's toy. One that could destroy the world.

In sudden anger he threw them from him and watched them fall downward into the forests below. There was a muffled explosion and the forests parted as though before a scythe. A cloud of birds soared briefly with load cries and then settled again into the trees.

No, those thousands of faceless researchers hadn't been wrong. Their view had been impossibly restricted, but their approach was right. They'd built a science on a million cold imper-

(*Continued on page 107*)

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The Penultimate Shore

By STANLEY E. ASPITTLE, JR.

In the deep of night, on the shore near the drowning palaces Huitzlin came to him. On a path of shimmering silver she crossed the black water dispersing dreams, dispelling his fears. She was moonlight and seafoam and brilliant stars and she loved him completely.

HIS name was Cipher and by day he was a wanderer of beaches and dunes covered with iceplant. By night he was the lover of a goddess. When the tide was low he prowled the ruins, explored the drowning villas and palaces, examined the fluted columns on their strangely carved pyramid bases, barnacle encrusted. He spent endless hours staring into teaming tidal pools. He wandered in the afternoons among the monolithic stones half buried in the dunes above the ruins. His days were a hiatus, a suspension of being until night brought the moon and tide and Huitzlin, bearing the fire of life.

He had originally come to that sea-borne place by chance and storm and shipwreck. He had searched for a place of peace, a pause in which to heal his spiritual hurts. He found, at first, sun and surf and solitude, seabirds, tidal life. Then he had discovered the ruins and wandered fascinated among them and speculated on their origin and meaning.

By day the dazzling interplay of degrees and dimensions of light in air and water bewildered him. By night he was possessed by strange illusions, disturbing hauntings.The steady rhythm of the surf hypnotized him, the tangling net of light among the ruins captured him and carried him to some far antipodes of mind where hallucination and reality blurred and united.

In sleepless, haunted nights he wandered across the ruins as the tide rose and possessed the buildings. Sea and moon conspired and pulled apart the veils of

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night and illusion. He was not alone in that ancient, ageless place. A boy slipped through planes of moonlight, paused to stare at him, then vanished in a shadow. A girl danced nude through silver creamed breakers, beckoning. When he went, she was gone but there were tiny tracks in the sand. The boy and the girl walked, another night, hand in hand among the ruins. The moonlight made their separate faces one: twins in youth and beauty and hallucination. Another night he awoke to musical notes falling like water into water. He searched about but could find no source save the sea and stars. The palaces and villas, moondrenched, looked more solid, less antique. All the day he was serenaded by the echo of the astral harp. That night, after he had moved to one of the villas, with the moon inundating the ruins and the shore as much as the sea, Huitzlin came.

At first, Cipher thought she was a delusion, later a succubus. With each night she became more substantial, more solidly with him. He ceased wandering and surrendered to her. By night she was all silver and cool. (By day, he knew, she would be all golden and warm). By night she was his and he hers. With the waning of the moon and the coming of the sun she rose, put on her gowns of white and glided back along her silver path. By day, both belonged to the ruins.

Gradually, in this sun and sea swept place huddled in a fold of time, so different from his old world of conference and crisis, decision and dread, shadow and sham, that vital soft-skinned part of him, world-wounded, healed.

The Talisman

THE ruins stretched along the shore for perhaps half a mile. They reached from the water to the low, iceplant covered dunes: perhaps a hundred yards. It had taken Cipher several days of awed wandering to discover they stretched even farther. Under the clear water were more villas and palaces, drowned in submarine forests, dancing illusory under layers of water and inhabited by sea-beings. He swam out among them but was not a good swimmer and had no equipment and so contented himself with the ruins above water. He finally moved from his lean-to into one of the villas close to the dunes. It was here, after his delusion, Huitzlin first found him.

Occasionally on his diurnal wanderings, Cipher came across the old man. At first he had been alone, then came the hallucinations, then Huitzlin. Then, one morning, the old man appeared. He haunted the ruins like a spec-

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tre, prowling among the buildings or sandhills as someone searching. He was not really old but his sudden presence, his mysterious movements evoked to Cipher "the old man of the ruins."

One night he asked Huitzlin about the newcomer who he regarded vaguely as an intruder into a private place.

"He was bound to come," she answered. Her slender fingers caressed his body as they did her harp: instinctively, with love.

"You mean somebody was bound to come, to disrupt our idyll."

She shook her long black hair. "No, my love. I mean he—this particular one—had to come." She buried her face into his shoulder so he could not read it.

"But why?" He felt a tremor pass along her body and held her closer. For a long time she did not answer, merely clung to him while the waves swept sighing among the graceful columns.

Then, in a voice husky and warm against his neck, she said, "You will know in time."

The next day, for the first time, Cipher approached the old man. He squatted on the side of a dune above the ruins and the shivering layers of light. He was thin and dark as if the shadow stretching out from him had its roots wrapped around him. When Cipher's shadow fell across his own he looked up and his thin, lipless mouth smiled a shadow of a cordial greeting. The face he showed Cipher was disturbingly familiar. He held up, in the palm of one narrow, long-fingered hand, an object for Cipher to inspect.

It was a small figurine of humanoid form, carved from a greenish stone which held streaks and sworls of black. It was cool and smooth and felt ageless.

"Interesting, don't you think," said the old man. He rose and was taller than Cipher had expected. "I've looked long for it." An indefinable accent warped his words.

"You knew it was here?"

"It had to be. Somewhere. Something like it." He closed his fingers over the figure, caressing it sensuously.

"Did it come from the ruins?"

"Of course. There is no other evidence of habitation here. In fact, I would venture you and I are the only life in this place."

Cipher felt his neck crawl. A cold wind seemed to rise from the sea, scattering the seabirds and even their shrill cries. The place, it was true, was strangely deserted of life except for the two of them and what the sea brought to the shore and, at night, Huitzlin and his hallucinations. The wind passed and he stared into the old man's ironic expression.

"Interesting, don't you think,"

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he said, waving over the sun-washed ruins.

"Do you have any idea who built them?" asked Cipher. "How they came to be here?"

"Some idea. It requires more examination." His fingers clenched tighter over the figure.

"Are you an archeologist?"

The old man spread his hands. "On an amateur basis. But I have acquired some knowledge of this place." A smile tugged his mouth, was suppressed.

"I am—I was—a diplomat," said Cipher for no reason. "My name is Cipher."

"I am called Thanatos." For a moment the old man's eyes seemed to widen, deepen. "And now you are ambassador at large to a dead place." He chuckled and it was like stones scraping together. "You must be so kind to excuse me. I must examine my treasure more carefully."

"Of course. What do you think it is?"

"A Talisman." Now his smile appeared unhampered. He opened his fingers and stared down at the figure in his palm. "To ward off some evil god, you know." Chuckling, he turned away and crossed the dunes out of sight.

For minutes afterward the image of those eyes and that face remained with Cipher. There was a familiarity there that haunted. Only then did he remember what Huitzlin had said.

That night he told her of the encounter. On the moondrenched terrace of his palace she stared long at his face, hers hidden by shadow and hair. Below, the surf pounded against the columns, surged and receded along the broad portico. Huitzlin moved closer to him, held him with a soft sob and would say nothing. Her body was long and slender and made muted and textured by moonlight: her element. When he made love to her on the warm smooth marble, she shook her hair over them both like a dark, fragrant tent, as if to hide them from threatening eyes. But only the moon watched, its light spread in silver waves along the drowning shore.

The Statue

IN the large central room of his villa, on a barnacle-encrusted dais, was a statue of the youth of his delusions. The ancient marble was darkened and streaked with salt. When he first discovered it, Cipher stared at it a long time, grappling with causes and effects, reasons and rationalizations. The slightly idealized, subtly abstracted figure was perfectly recognizable as though projected out of his hallucinations. He stared at it a long time. The sounds of surf and seabirds receded from his awareness and he was left in isolation with the

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tensed, beautiful figure. There was menace implicit in it, as if the long dead sculptor had somehow captured that essence, too, in frozen form. And there was, Cipher saw, the same sense of familiarity he'd seen in the old man.

When Huitzlin came he showed her the statue and told her of his time of delusions. He told her how the one must have caused the other in that period of hallucination. She listened silent, her dark eyes looking not at the statue but in it. She listened until Cipher ran out of words and stood shivering and vulnerable. Then she took his hand and led him back to the warm night and moonbathed terrace and took him into herself for the solace there.

"Thanatos," he mumbled in troubled half-sleep just before dawn. "He said his name was Thanatos."

Huitzlin, dressing, paused and looked at him and seemed to strain toward him. But the moon was low and the light rising in the east behind the dead hills and she had to go. She stooped and kissed his troubled face and stroked his damp hair, then rose, took up her harp and fled across the cold dark water.

When Cipher awoke he went down to the sea and swam to clear his mind. Around him the light grew and cast color and dimension back into the world. Coming out of the water, shivering in the pale dawn, he saw two forms nearby, coupled on the wet sand. Even as he saw them they separated, rising, smiling. They were the twins of his hallucinations, suddenly solid in the world of light. Hand in hand they stood, side by side they watched him. The boy stood in the statue pose, the girl mirrored it. Then, before he could move, they turned and disappeared into the ruins.

With a cry Cipher followed but they had vanished into light and shadow. All day he searched each villa and palace but there was no life but his own and the eternally wheeling seabirds. Sometime, without his awareness, his search turned from the twins to the old man. But he too had vanished behind planes of light, behind illusion's subtle veils. Near dusk when, exhausted, he abandoned his search, he saw the old man emerge dripping from the sea. The water beaded on him and reflected the fading sun like tiny stars. But his naked body was opaquely dark as if refusing light or, rather, absorbing all light and reflecting none.

The Stones and the Pools

GRADUALLY, as he accepted the reality of Huitzlin, Cipher began to doubt that of the

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old man. Yet there was no doubting his physical presence. He was glimpsed often, now here, now there, on his mysterious quest. Cipher did not see the boy and girl again and felt the last shreds of delerium had left him. He avoided the statue, for its inherent menace and familiarity troubled him. He based his routine in this place entirely on the nocturnal visits of Huitzlin. For food he fished and rationed the stores he had salvaged from his stormwrecked ship. For water he drank from a stream that ran down out of the interior to the sea. It was a good water, cool and clear and pure.

In the dead hills behind the dunes he came upon the monolithic stones. Half buried in the rocky soil, splitting the coarse, sterile turf, they were the tablets of some race of giants. There were two dozen or so and they faced the ruins and the ocean. Their faces were carved with strange hieroglyphics he thought must be visible even from the sea. The characters and symbols were as tall as he. From them the shore could not be seen but only the pelagic waters, infinite shades of blues and green. The message on the stones was a mystery, unsolvable.

Cipher wandered here, tracing the markings with eye and hand or sitting staring at the many-hued belly of the ocean or back into the bleak and silent interior of cruel formation, brutal desolation.

Returning from the stones one afternoon, near the mouth of the stream, he encountered the old man. They watched a column of crabs scuttle through the shallow water across the streambed.

"Have you noticed the peculiar absence of life here?" asked the old man. Cipher glanced up at him, silhouetted against the sun. When he looked back the crabs were gone. "The only life is what the sea brings. That, I believe, includes us. All life lives a precarious, tidal sort of existence. The interior is uninhabited."

"You've been there?"

"To the marble quarry, to the headwaters of our stream, to the center of this place in fact." He swept his eyes over the shore. "Don't you find it strange the only life here only exists on this shore, cast up amid ruins? And is it by mere chance, blind currents or, do you think, a prescient destiny?"

Cipher rose and looked across the shore strewn with crumbling buildings, fallen columns, naked arches, at the water covering already drowned buildings.

"This was once a great and gleaming city," said the old man as they walked through the changing light toward the beach." The center of civilization, of the world. It extended for

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miles down there." He pointed seaward. "That was a long, broad valley before the sea rose or the land sank. What we have here is merely the uppermost section of that city never since equalled.

They looked off across the great burnished surface of the sea, into the glare of sun reflected and magnified and congealed in water and sky.

"Have you noticed the high saline content of this sea?" They approached the ruins along a shelf of rock jutting out into the water. "The mythic, elemental Sea of Tethys. Stretching from what dim shores beyond history to—where? To what unknown coasts, what black beaches?"

They stepped carefully to avoid the tidal pools. The low sun was dazzling, the strange planes of light through which they moved narcotic. Cipher, dazzled, felt his gaze drawn, as if to relief, to the trapped pools, trapped worlds of life and death and existence. He was aware through the layers of light enveloping him of the old man's voice nearby, explaining in detail the ontological cycles of the captive creatures. But the pools were empty, containing only miniscule reflections of the sea. And he was drowning in each of them.

FROM somewhere out of the blinding sky came a low throbbing note like the sixth octave C of a harp, drawn out and out.

Staggering, Cipher felt a strong, dry hand grip his arm and hold him. He looked up and Thanatos smiled at him. The face blurred, became younger, blurred again, became another, softer. The edge of a wave broke cold over his feet and the sea was deep blue caressed by a cooling breeze. The sun was bright white, the sky a mirror of the sea and the old man's face smiled at him. At his feet the pools, disrupted by the wave, swarmed with violent, precarious life. A mist dissolved, a mere shade, a few wisps like spiderwebs around the periphery of his mind.

"Too much sun," he mumbled.

The old man resumed his lecture on marine biology. For a long time Cipher was lost, fascinated, in the low voice. When he voiced admiration the old man demurred.

"I have catholic interests." The sun hung on the taut edge of the world and even as they watched its lower arc vanished. Behind them darkness gathered on the edges of the sky. "I am a dilettante in the sciences, a dabbler in mysteries, a jack—of—all—things." He turned dark eyes on Cipher. "And you, I think, are a poet, a dreamer."

Cipher shook his head. "I was a diplomat."

"Why are you here?"

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Without considering, Cipher found himself answering. "There was a moral dilemma I was incapable of solving. What right has one nation or alliance of nations to decide the fate and destiny of all mankind? Was what we were doing, trying to do, right for the majority of mankind? I could no longer function." He glanced at the old man's profile. "And you, why are you here?"

As answer, he indicated the ruins they were approaching. "I am a wanderer of ruins, a searcher of lost civilization, of shattered fates."

Only the topmost arc of the sun, now red, lay on the ocean's edge. It became a crescent, then only a spot of fire. Unblinking, Cipher watched. At the instant of total disappearance there was a flash of green, then night swept like a slow wave across the world. They walked together into the ruins, through a twilight that seemed to thicken in the buildings around them.

"Have you discovered more about the ruins?" asked Cipher.

"They are the remnants of a world we are ignorant of. They are the physical remains of a world existing nowhere in history but in all myths." He seemed to have merged with the night and was only a disembodied voice.

"How did you learn of it?"

"I am a student of relationships, a dabbler in the arcane study of patterns and possibilities, of causes and effects. There are tenuous trails leading here. This place had to exist at this spot. No alternatives existed. None ever do. I came to verify this and to look for something. And, of course, to see the drowning temples."

"Temples?" said Cipher. "I think of them more as palaces or villas."

"That," said the old man, "is the difference between us."

There was silence and Cipher realized he was alone. He walked under a spreading mantle of stars, accompanied by the pulsing of the sea and a breath of a wind. Off behind the dunes and the hills and the stones a silver light appeared and thickened. He reached his villa when, brilliantly, the moon appeared. Nearby, the tide rose to meet it, surging up through graceful arches, across exquisite floors, around slender columns, rushing like a lover. A path of silver rippled out across the dark water, a path between intangled sky and sea.

Silently, swiftly, autoluminescent, Huitzlin came.

Huitzlin

WHILE she serenaded him, Cipher sat on the wall of the terrace, staring at the reflections of stars mingling with phospho-

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rus in the sea. Her music reached into him as if she played notes and chords and constructed melodies on his nerves, in his soul. Her music was a live substance, as present and substantial as night and stars, moon and sea. When she finished and set aside her harp he was conscious of himself again. Waves washed through the palace, echoing in splendid vaulted rooms.

"Tell me about your music," he said.

She came and sat beside him, too beautiful to look at.

"It is the music of the dwellers of this place. There has been none like it since. As there has been no place like this since."

"What place is this?" he asked her.

"Do you not know?" Her voice had the same volume and timbre as the waves and he thought she was the sea speaking.

He shook his head. Whether she sighed or the wind blew through the empty villas, across the dunes, among the stones, he could not tell.

"This is a lost place," she said, "a first place, a primeval place. It is a place long forgotten by the world or never known. This place does not exist to the world nor the world to it. Yet the far shores of this place are in the world." Her face was in profile against the moonlight. She was not so much a voice speaking to him as the seaborn wind speaking to the drowning shore. "This place and the world are different realms, separated by many veils of illusion. Time is one such illusion. Perhaps this place is also an illusion. Perhaps the world is. Yet this place existed, long ago, in the world and connected all parts of it like the trunk of a tree. It was called the navel."

When her voice stopped he heard the wind and the sea and thought she continued speaking without words.

"And you?" he said softly. "What are you?"

For a time she was silent and he thought she would not speak. She touched her harp which murmured to her.

"I am Huitzlin," she said and her name conjured harps and waterfall and birdsong. In the silver light diamonds glistened in her eyes and on her cheeks. "I am an after-image, perhaps, merely a lingering impression of the dwellers of this place."

He could not ask her more. He took her to him and drank her tears and tried to sooth her. She clung to him like one in terror of dark shapes just beyond sight. He loved her and felt her fear and it became his and he was reluctant to let her go.

"Stay," he whispered.

"I cannot," she murmured.

"Stay," he urged.

"I cannot," she said.

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"Stay," he pleaded, urgently.

"I cannot," she cried.

And, like waning moonlight, she melted from him and fled along her path as night flees before the invading day.

Cipher slept. His dreams were vague, haunted visions peopled by the twins, the old man and Huitzlin and a formless menace that stalked the silent shore. He awoke unrefreshed and uneasy. Dark clouds were massed over the horizon and the sun shed a flat, depthless light. The sea was the color of pewter and ran restless and high. A cold, sporadic wind, like the breathing of an angered Poseidon, drove waves against the shore. From time to time a cold spray blew across the ruins like a lash. It was as if the elements conspired to destroy the remaining buildings.

For Cipher it was a portent.

The Storm

ALL day he stayed in the villa, in a strange suspension of thought and feeling. As though connected to the light he existed only vestigially. Fitfully he tried to interpret the carvings on the column bases, the worn inscriptions on the walls. He tried sporadically to fathom the mystery of the statue, the enigma of the old man, the meaning of the monoliths and of the ruins themselves. He thought of Huitzlin and of himself, of chance or fate. Mostly he just paced the villa and watched the storm gather.

In the afternoon the sky darkened and the sea rose and he saw a black curtain fuse the two and rush shoreward. Waves broke across the terrace, the tide ran all the way to the dunes and the storm struck.

Thanatos came. Stormborne he came, dripping and dark. His eyes devoured the villa. Turned on Cipher, they radiated irony and mockery and menace.

"You live here," he said in a voice tense with glee.

Cipher nodded. Lightning split the sky. The storm was much like the one that had cast him here and he could not suppress a shudder. It was as before: as if a familiar and understood environment had suddenly betrayed him. His peace was cracking, his old fears leaking back in. And somehow, he felt, Thanatos was connected to this as darkness to an eclipse.

In his hand the old man carried the carved talisman. While he roamed the villa, hot-eyed, his fingers caressed it with tense, brutal movements.

Outside it was like night. The sea smashed again and again at the ruins. Black waves crashed across the terrace and swept around the ankles of Cipher and the other.

They stood before the statue of

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the boy. Thanatos stood rigid, his whole being in his dark eyes, his eyes absorbing the statue.

And Cipher, seeing them both in juxtaposition, anamnesis flooding him, identified the strange familiarity, recognized the menace. And, as the old man turned to him, his skin pulled taut by a ghastly smile, he recognized another thing.

"You," he said, looking from man to statue.

Thanatos laughed, nodded.

"I don't understand. The boy and girl . . ."

Thanatos tossed another laugh at the storm which howled. "Impressions, projections, what does it matter."

"Then they weren't real?"

For the third time Thanatos laughed. "Real? Surely this place has taught you something of the nature of reality."

Cipher shook his head. The storm was in his head, battering his thoughts, drowning his perceptions. Everything was swept into fragments by the storm.

"The girl . . ."

"My sister of long ago. She is called various things, most commonly: Fate."

"Is she Huitzlin?"

A wave, larger than the rest, swelled over the terrace and broke across the room. It crashed against the statue and nearly knocked Cipher off his feet. The wind rose to a shriek, drove like a fist into him. Through it all stood Thanatos in a spot of calm, untouched and grinning.

"Is she?" asked Cipher, struggling against the ebb of the sea.

"Not really," said Thanatos. "She is herself, whatever she tells you she is. She will not deceive you. Nor, in fact, will I. Nor will this place."

The storm seemed subsiding, the wind and sea dropping. The clouds seethed and coiled about each other like celestial serpents and rents appeared revealing pallid yellow light.

"I don't understand," said Cipher. He was soaked and chilled and fearsome.

"Yes," said Thanatos, "you really do." He turned back to the statue and stared at it. The wind fell to a breeze that blew the clouds above the quieting sea.

"I know the statue is you," said Cipher. "I know what I see in it and you is what I saw every day of my life before coming here, the look everybody had somewhere in them, some on the surface, some just below, others deep inside. I was never aware of it until I was removed from it and saw it in you. You and that statue and probably myself. It's the look of the dead."

Thanatos turned abruptly and left. On the terrace he turned back and seemed to gather all the late, pale light around him until he was like a core of darkness.

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"I shall leave soon," he said. He held Cipher's eyes in his own dark stare. "It is time we all did." Then he was gone.

Cipher stood in the pale sun and tried to get warm. The day had been annihilated by the storm and night came. Clouds still flowed across the face of the sky and he was fearsome. But the moon rose and the path formed across the water and he waited.

The Penultimate Shore

THE moon was past its zenith when she came. Cipher embraced her and held her tightly as if releasing her would mean losing her. Wordless they clung together under the black clouds. He raised her face and stared long into her eyes and drank deep of her. When he removed his hands she put her face on his shoulder and wept. After a time Cipher stirred, shivered. Huitzlin pulled her gowns tighter and stroked her harp idly.

"Is there anything to do?" asked Cipher. He looked at her form, inhaled her scent, heard her breathing and tried to assimilate her into himself.

"No, my love," she said. Her heartbeat was echoed by the waves.

"There is nothing you can do?"

"No, nothing." She fell silent. Then: "I cannot fight him or stop him or even affect him. We inhabit different realms and are of different elements. I am merely an effect, perhaps. He is a cause."

"Why is the statue here the only one in the ruins?"

"The swellers of this place would not take death with them. They left the statue—and me."

He felt her warm tears on his shoulder and kissed them from her cheeks. Tasting them, like tasting the sea, he absorbed another part of her. Overhead the clouds moved in regal procession across the stars. There was much he wanted to know but for the moment it was enough to just know her.

Later, he said, "Does Thanatos affect you?"

"Only in the way he affects the ruins, only in how he affects you"

And, "The stones in the hills are a warning?"

"Yes. Because the statue is here, Thanatos is here. This is why there is no life except here on the edge of the sea."

And, "Does he have a power over you?"

"He rules this realm as he rules the other."

"When we are gone . . ."

"I will remain as I have always done."

"Will others come?"

"Perhaps."

"Have others come?"

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She rose and gathered her harp. Her hair hid her face and she did not look at him. In the ruins below them shadows moved, patterns formed, dissolved, reformed. One shadow moved through the rest.

"You must not go," said Cipher.

"I must. It is time."

On the sea the moonpath rippled, clung to the black water tenuously. The shadow reached the shadow of the temple, dissolved into it and passed through it.

Cipher clutched her hand. "You cannot go."

"I must. Look, the path is breaking."

He looked and she slipped from him and fled down the stairs and along the shore. With a shout of anguish he followed. Gliding from darkness to darkness, the shadow pursued.

Clouds tore the face of the moon. Moonlight flitted fleetingly among the entangled shadows of the ruins. On the shore Huitzlin poised, seeking her path across the water, above the drowned palaces, over the lost valley. Cipher ran along the shore, dodging shadows, racing the clouds. Beside him fast-footed, ran the old man, as dark as darkness.

The wind drove a cloud before the moon and the shore was plunged in blackness. Huitzlin gave a cry, the shadow a chuckle. The moon appeared, clear of the clouds and sent its path out to the shore. As Cipher reached out Huitzlin was on it, gliding out and away. She turned and he saw tears frozen on her cheeks, saw her arms stretch out.

"Go," whispered the shadows.

"She's calling," murmured the old man.

"Go," commanded Thanatos.

Trembling, Cipher stepped onto the path of shivering silver. The sea receded and he ran across the seabed, through the long drowned ruins covered with forests of seaweed waving in the night wind. The ocean receded down the broad valley and Cipher ran along a highway of silver gleaming in the moonlight. Beside him, in a shadow, raced death.

Far out on the water where the moonlight glittered like fire, Huitzlin turned and saw and cried in terror and longing and loss. Her grief split the night and the ruins on the drowning shore shuddered under the wind.

The sea stopped receding and turned. Cipher saw the black tide rise before him, saw the shadow rushing before it and opened his mouth. The bloodwarm wave filled it, flooded his veins and carried him to the center of the sea.

THE END

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THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME

CONCLUSION

By KEITH LAUMER

Synopsis of Parts One and Two

Brion Bayard, a former American diplomat, now a colonel in the intelligence service of the Imperium—the supra-national government which rules the Net of alternate worlds opened up by the development in 1896 of the Maxoni-Cocini generator—is summoned late one evening to the office of his old friend Baron von Richthofen, chief of Imperial Intelligence. As armed guards stand by, Richthofen quizzed Bayard closely—on matters of Bayard's personal life and recent activities which are well known to both parties.

Satisfied, Richthofen dismisses the guards, apologizes—but offers no explanation. As Bayard leaves the building, he sees charred footprints in the corridor, follows them to an unused sub-cellar, and there encounters a fantastic, glowing figure, bending over a fallen man. Bayard attacks; long pink sparks jump from the fiery figure to meet him—and a titanic explosion slams him into unconsciousness.

He awakens to find himself alone, the city deserted—except for a lone column of marching creatures: non-human, ape-like

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figures in coveralls and helmets. He trails them to the Net Garages where the alternate-world-travelling shuttles are housed; discovered, he commandeers an alien shuttle parked among the Imperial machines—and finds himself locked on an automatic course for the aliens' home world.

Arriving in the Hagroon world, he is hauled from the machine, beaten, marched through streets thronged with ape-men of a dozen varieties, toiling in harness beside mastodons. He is thrust into a cell—where he finds Dzok, a representative of still another non-human race of Anthropos. Dzok, he learns, is an agent of the Authority, a supergovernment which, like the Imperium, rules a vast empire of alternate worlds. Only the vastness of the Net—or the Web, as Dzok calls the continuum of parallel universes—has prevented the two powers from meeting in the past.

They escape together, and in a stolen shuttle travel to Dzok's home world, Xonijeel, where, Dzok says, Bayard will doubtless receive help in returning to the Zero-zero world of the Imperium, and in solving the mystery of the deserted capitol. He is given a hearing before a Council of Elders—but instead of help, he is condemned to transportation for life to a sub-technical A-line.

Here he is befriended by Olyvia, a beautiful young woman who masquerades as Mother Goodwill, an ancient crone, in order to lend authority to her role as village mesmerist. He soon learns that this world, with a Common History date near 1800, is in some ways remarkably similar to the Zero-zero A-line of the Imperium. On a wild hope, Bayard and Olyvia travel to Rome, where Maxoni and Cocini, the inventors of the M-C generator, lived. After a search, they find the notes of Maxoni, renowned for his invention of an improved galvanic buggy-whip, and, working from the inventor's early (and in this world, unsuccessful) models, plus his own knowledge as a shuttle operator, Bayard constructs an M-C device. In his make-shift shuttle, he launches himself across the Blight—the vast desolation of devastated world-lines surrounding the home-world of the Imperium. Crashing on an unknown horror world, he is hopelessly stranded among giant predators until a crude trap yields a surprise victim—Dzok.

CHAPTER XI

TRACKING you wasn't easy, old boy," Dzok said, offering me a second cup of a coffee-like drink he had brewed over the small fire he had built. "I can assure you I was in bad odor

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with the Council for my part in bringing you to Xonijeel; however, the best offense is a good defense, as the saying goes; I countered by preferring charges against Minister Sphogeel for compromise of an official TDP position, illegal challenge of an Agent's competence, failure to refer a matter of Authoritarian security to a full Board meeting—"

"I don't quite get the picture, Dzok," I interrupted. "*You* conned me into going to Xonijeel by promising me help against the Hagroon—"

"Really, Bayard, I promised no more than that I'd do my best. It was a piece of ill luck that old Sphogeel was on the Council that week; he's a notorious xenophobe. I never dreamed he'd go so far as to consign you to exile based on a kangaroo-hearing—"

"You were the one who grabbed my gun," I pointed out.

"Lucky thing, too. If you'd managed to kill someone, there'd have been nothing I could have done to save you from being burned down on the spot. And I'm not sure I'd have wanted to. You *are* a blood-thirsty blighter, you know."

"So you followed me to B-I Four . . ."

"As quickly as I could. Managed to get myself assigned as escort to a recruitment group—all Native chaps, of course—"

"Native chaps?" asked Brion.

"Ahhh . . . Anglics, like yourself, captured as cubs; er, babies, that is. Cute little fellows, Anglic cubs; can't help warming to them. Easy to train, too, and damnably human—"

"OK, you can skip the propaganda; somehow it doesn't help my morale to picture human slaves as lovable lighties."

Dzok cleared his throat. "Of course, old chap. Sorry. I merely meant—well, hang it, man, what can I say? We treated you badly! I admit it! But—" he flashed me a sly smile. "I neglected to mention your rather sturdy hypnotic defenses against conditioning. I daresay you'd have had a bit more trouble throwing off your false memories if they'd known and modified their indoctrination accordingly. And to make amends I came after you, only to find you'd flown the coop—"

"Why so mysterious? Why not come right up and knock on the door and say all was forgiven—"

Dzok chuckled. "Now now, dear boy, can you imagine the reaction of a typical Anglic bucolic to *my* face appearing at the door, inquiring after a misplaced chum?"

I scratched at my jaw, itchy with two day's stubble. "All right, you had to be circumspect. But you could have phoned—"

"I could have remained hidden in the garret until after dark,

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then ventured out to reconnoitre, which is precisely what I did," Dzok said firmly. "I was ready to approach you at Mrs. Rogers' house, when you slipped away from me. I located you again at the cottage at the edge of the woods, but again you moved too quickly—"

"We spotted you creeping around," I told him. "I thought it was the Xonijeelian Gestapo getting ready to revise the sentence to something more permanent than exile."

"Again, I was about to speak to you on the road, when that fellow in the cocked hat interfered. Then you fooled me by taking a train. Had a devil of a time learning where you'd gone. I had to return to Xonijeel, travel to Rome, re-shuttle to your so-called B-I Four line, then set about locating you. Fortunately, we maintain a permanent station in Italy, with a number of trusties who—"

"More natives, I presume?"

"Quite. I say, old man, you're developing something of a persecution complex, I'm afraid—"

"That's easy, when you're persecuted."

"Nonsense. Why, you know I've always dealt with you as an equal . . ."

"Sure, some of your best friends are people. But to hell with that. Go on."

"Umm. Yes. Of course, I had to operate under cover of darkness. Even then, it was far from easy. The Roman police are a suspicious lot. I turned you up at last, waited about outside your flat, then realized what you were about, and hurried to your ship; you know what happened there. . . ." He rubbed his round skull gingerly. "Still tender, you know. Fortunately for me I was well wrapped up—"

"If you'd just said something . . ." I countered.

"Just as I opened my mouth, you hit me."

"All right, I'm sorry—sorrier than you know, considering what I went through after that. How the hell did you trail me here?"

He grinned, showing too many even white teeth. "Your apparatus, old boy; fantastically inefficient; left a trail across the Web I could have followed on a bicycle."

"You came to B-I Four ostensibly on a recruitment mission, you said?"

"Yes, I could hardly reveal what I had in mind—and it seemed a likely spot to find some eager volunteers for Anglic Sector duty—"

"I thought you had plenty of trusties you'd raised from cubs."

"We need a large quota of native-recuited personnel for our Special Forces, chaps who know the languages and mores of the Anglic lines. We're able to offer

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these lads an exciting career, good pay, retirement. It's not a bad life, as members of an elite corps—"

"Won't it look a little strange when you come back without your recruits?"

"Ah, but I have my recruits, dear boy! Twenty picked men, waiting at the depot at Rome B-I Four."

I TOOK a breath and asked the Question: "So you came to make amends: What kind of amends? Are you offering me a ride home?"

"Look here, Bayard," Dzok said earnestly. "I've looked into that business of Sphogeel's photogram—the one which clearly indicated that there is no normal A-line at the Web coordinates you mentioned—"

"So you think I'm nuts too?"

He shook his head. "It's not so simple as that. . . ."

"What's that supposed to mean?" my pulse was picking up, getting ready for bad news.

"I checked the records, Bayard. Three weeks ago—at the time you departed your home line in the Hagroon shuttle—your Zero-zero line was there, just as you said. Less than twelve hours later—nothing."

I gaped at him.

"It can mean only one thing. . . . I'm sorry to be the one to tell you of this, but it appears there's been an unauthorized use of a device known as a discontinuity Engine."

"Go on," I growled.

"Our own technicians devised the apparatus, over a hundred years ago; it was used in a war with a rebellious province. . . ."

I just looked at him, waiting.

"I can hardly play the role of apologist for the actions of the previous generation, Bayard," Dzok said stiffly. "Suffice it to say that the machine was outlawed by unamimous vote of the High Board of the Authority, and never used again. By us, that is. But now it seems that the Hagroon have stolen the secret—"

"What does a discontinuity engine do?" I demanded. "How could it conceal the existence of an A-line from your instruments?"

"The device" Dzok said unhappily, "once set up in any A-line releases the entropic energy of that line in random fashion; a ring of energy travels outward, creating what we've termed a probability storm in each A-line as the wave front passes. As for your Zero-zero line—it's gone, old man, snuffed out of existence. It no longer exists. . . ."

I got to my feet, feeling lightheaded, dizzy. Dzok's voice went on, but I wasn't listening. I was picturing the Hagroon, stringing wire in the deserted garages of the Net Terminal; quietly,

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methodically preparing to destroy a world. . . .

"Why?" I yelled. "Why? We had no quarrel with them . . ."

"They discovered your Net capabilities; you were a threat, to be eliminated—"

"Wait a minute! You said *your* bunch invented this Discontinuity whatzit; how did the Hagroon get hold of it?"

"That, I don't know—but I intend to find out."

"Are you telling me they just put on false whiskers and walked in and lifted it when nobody was looking? That's a little hard to swallow whole, Dzok. I think it's a lot easier to believe you boys worked along with the Hagroon, hired them to do your dirty work—"

"If that were the case, why would I be here now?" Dzok demanded.

"I don't know, Why *are* you here?"

"I've come to help you, Bayard. To do what I can—"

"What would that be—another one-way ticket to some nice dead end where I can set up house-keeping and plant a garden and forget all about what might have been, once, in a world that doesn't exist anymore because some people with too much hair decided we might be a nuisance and didn't want to take the chance—" I was advancing on Dzok, with ideas of seeing if his throat was as easy to squeeze as it looked. . . .

Dzok sat where he was, staring at me. "You don't have to behave like a complete idiot, Bayard, in spite of your races' unhappy reputation for blind ferocity—besides which, I happen to be stronger than you . . ." He took something from the pocket of his trim white jacket, tossed it at my feet. It was my slug-gun. I scooped it up.

"Still, if you actually are a homicidal maniac, go ahead; don't bother to listen to what I have to say, or to wonder why I came here."

I looked at him across the fire, then thrust the gun into my pocket and sat down. "Go ahead," I said. "I'm listening."

I GAVE the matter considerable thought, Bayard," Dzok said calmly. He poured himself another cup of coffee, sniffed at it, balanced it on his knee. "And an idea occurred to me . . ."

I didn't say anything. It was very silent; even the nightbirds had stopped calling. Somewhere, far away, something bellowed. A breeze stirred the trees overhead; they sighed like an old man remembering the vanished loves of his youth.

"We've developed some interesting items in our Web Research Labs," Dzok said. "One of our most recent creations has

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been a special, lightweight suit, with its Web circuitry woven into the fabric itself. The generator is housed in a shoulder pack weighing only a few ounces, its design is based on a new application of plasma mechanics, utilizing the nuclear forces rather than the conventional magneto-electronic fields—"

"Sure," I snapped. "What does it have to do with me?"

"It gives the wearer Web mobility without a shuttle." Dzok continued. "The suit *is* the shuttle. Of course, it's necessary to attune the suit to the individual wearer's entropic quotient—but that in itself is an advantage: it creates an auto-homing feature. When the field is activated, the wearer is automatically transferred to the continuum of minimum stress—namely, his A-line of origin—or whatever other line his metabolism is attuned to."

"Swell; you've developed an improved shuttle. So what?"

"I have one here. For you." Dzok waved toward the bubble-shape of his standard Xonijeel model Web traveller—a far more sophisticated device than the clumsy machines of the Imperium. "I smuggled it into my cargo locker—after stealing it from the lab. I'm a criminal on several counts on your behalf, old fellow."

"What do I do with this suit? Go snark-hunting? You've already told me my world is gone—"

"There is another development which I'm sure you'll find of interest," Dzok went on imperturbably. "In our more abstruse researches into the nature of the Web, we've turned up some new findings that place rather a new complexion on our old theories of reality. Naturally, on first discovering the nature of the Web, one was forced to accept the fact that the narrow viewpoint of a single world-line did not represent the totality of all existence; that in a Universe of infinities, that all possible things are real. But still, with the intellectual chauvinism inherent in our mono-linear orientation, we assumed that the wavefront of simultaneous reality advanced everywhere at the same rate; that 'now' in one A-line was of necessity 'now' in every other—and that this was an imutable quality, as irreversible as entropy . . ."

"Well, isn't it?"

"Yes—precisely as irreversible as entropy. But now it appears that entropy can be reversed—and very easily, at that." He smiled triumphantly.

"Are you saying," I said carefully, "that you people have developed time travel?"

Dzok laughed. "Not at all—not in the direction sense you

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mean. There is an inherent impossibility in reversing one's motion along one's own, personal time track . . ." he looked thoughtful. "At least, I think there is—"

"Then what are you saying?"

"When one moves outward from one's own A-line, crossing other lines in their myriads, it is possible, by proper application of these newly harnessed subatomic hyper-magnetic forces I mentioned to you, to set up a sort of—tacking, one might call it. Rather than travelling across the lines in a planiform temporal statis, as is normal with more primitive drives, we found that it was possible to cant the vector—to retrogress temporally, to levels contemporaneous with the past of the line of origin—to distances proportional to the distance of normal Web displacement."

"I guess that means something," I said. "But what?"

"It means that with the suit I've brought you, you can return to your Zero-zero-line—at a time prior to its disappearance!"

IT was nearly daylight now. Dzok and I had spent the last few hours over a chart laid out on the tiny navigation table in his shuttle, making calculations based on the complex formulation which he said represented the relationships existing between normal entropy, E-entropy, Net displacement, the entropic quotient of the body in question—me—and other factors too numerous to mention, even if I'd understood them.

"You're a difficult case, Bayard," the agent said, shaking his head. He opened a flat case containing an instrument like a stethoscope with a fitting resembling a phonographic pick-up, took readings against my skull, compared with the figures he had already written out.

"I think I've corrected properly for your various wanderings in the last few weeks," he said. "Since it's been a number of years since your last visit to your original A-line—B-1 three—I think we can safely assume that you've settled into a normal entropic relationship with your adopted Zero-zero line—"

"Better run over those manual controls with me again—just in case."

"Certainly—but let's hope you have no occasion to use them. It was mad of you, old chap, to set out in that makeshift shuttle of yours, planning to navigate by the seat of your pants. It just won't work, you know; you'd never have found your target—"

"OK, but I won't worry about that until after I find out if I'm going to survive this new trip. What kind of margin of error will I have?"

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Dzok looked concerned. "Not as much as I'd like. My observations indicated that your Zero-zero line was destroyed twenty-one days ago; the maximum displacement I can give you with the suit at this range is twenty-three days; you'll have approximately forty-eight hours after your arrival to circumvent the Hagroon. How you'll do that—"

"Is my problem," I finished for him.

"I've given it some thought," Dzok said. "You observed them at work in Null time; from your description of what they were about, it seems apparent that they were erecting a transfer portal linking in the Null level with its corresponding aspect of normal entropy—in other words, with the normal continuum. They'd need this, of course, in order to set up the Discontinuity Engine in the line itself. Your task will be to give warning, and drive them back when they make their assault."

"We can handle that," I assured him grimly. "The trick will be convincing people I'm not nuts . . ." I didn't add the disquieting thought that in view of the attitude of the Imperial authorities—at our last meeting—my own oldest friends included, it was doubtful whether I'd get the kind of hearing that could result in prompt action. But I could worry about that later too, after I'd made the trip—if I succeeded in finding my target at all.

"Now to fit the suit," Dzok lifted the lid of a wall locker, took out a limp outfit like a nylon diver's suit, held it up to me.

"A bit long in the leg, but I'll soon make that right. . . ." He went to work like a skilled seamstress, using shears and a hot iron, snipping and re-sealing the soft, woven-plastic material. I tried a fitting, watched while he shortened the sleeves, then added a section down the middle of the back to accommodate my wider shoulders.

"Doesn't that hand-tailoring interfere with the circuits?" I asked as he fussed over the helmet-to-shoulder fit.

"Not at all; the pattern of the weave's the thing—so long as I make sure the major connecting links are made up fast . . ."

He settled the fishbowl in place, then touched a stud on a plate set in the chest area of the suit, looked at the meters mounted on a small test panel on the table. He nodded, switched off.

"Now, Bayard," he said seriously, "your controls are here. . . ."

IT was full daylight now; Dzok and I stood on the grassy bank above the river, I in my new suit and he looking worried, his tight-fitting white jacket

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open and rumpled, his dark face haggard.

"You're sure you understand the spatial maneuvering controls. . . . ?"

"Sure—that part's easy; I just kick off and jet—"

"You'll have to use extreme care; of course, you won't feel the normal gravitic effects, so you'll be able to flit about as lightly as a puff of smoke—but you'll still retain normal inertia; if you collide with a tree, or rock, it will be precisely as disastrous as in a normal entropic field."

"I'll be careful, Dzok. And you do the same." I held out my hand and he took it, grinning.

"Good bye, Bayard. Best of luck and all that. Pity we could not have worked out something in the way of an alliance between our respective governments, but perhaps it was a bit premature. At least now there'll be the chance of a future reapproachement."

"Sure—and thanks for everything."

He stepped back and waved; I looked around for a last glimpse of the morning sun, the greenery, Dzok's transparent shuttle, and Dzok himself, long-legged, his shiny boots mud-spattered, his whites mud-stained. He raised a hand and I pressed the lever that activated the suit. There was a moment of vertigo, a sense of pressure on all sides; then Dzok flickered, disappeared; his shuttle winked out of sight; the strange, abnormal movement of normally immobile objects that was characterisitc of Net travel started up. I watched as the trees wavered, edged about in the soil, putting out groping feelers toward me as though sensing my presence.

A hop, and I was in the air, drifting ten feet above the surface. I touched the jet-control and at once a blast of cold ions hurled me forward. I took a bearing, corrected course, and settled down for a long run.

I was on my way.

CHAPTER XII

IT was a weird trip across the probability worlds, exposed as I was to the full panoramic effects of holacausts of planetary proportions. For a while I skimmed above a sea of boiling lava that stretched to the far horizon; then I was drifting among fragments of the crust of a shattered world; and later I watched as pale flames licked the cinders of a burnt-out continent. All the while I sped northward, following the faint *be-beep!* of my autocompass, set on a course that would bring me to the site of Stockholm after four hour's flight. I saw great seas of oily, dead fluid surge across what had

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once been land, their foaming crests oddly flowing backwards, as I retrogressed through time while I hurled across A-space. I watched the obscene heaving and groping of monstrous life-forms created in the chaotic aftermath of the unleashed powers of the M-C field, great jungles of blood red plants, deserts of blasted, shattered stone over which the sun flared like an arc light in a black airless sky. Now and again there would be a brief uprising of almost normal landscape, as I swept across a cluster of A-lines which had suffered less than the others, but always the outre element intruded: A vast, wallowing animal form, like a hundred-ton dog, or a mountainous, mutated cow, with extra limbs and lolling heads placed at random across the vast bulk through which blood-red vines grew, penetrating the flesh.

Hours passed; I checked my chronometer and the navigational instruments set in the wrist of the suit; I was close to my target and, according to the positional indicator, over southern Sweden—not that the plain of riven rock below me resembled the warm and verdant plains of Scania I had last seen on a hiking trip with Barbor, three months earlier.

I maneuvered close to the ground, crossed a finger of the sea which marked the location of Nykoping in normal space. I was getting close now; it was time to pick a landing spot. It wouldn't do to land too close to the city; popping into identity on a crowded street would be unwise. I recognized the low, rolling country south of the capital now; I slowed my progress, hovered, waiting for the moment . . .

Abruptly, light and color blazed around me; I threw the main control switch, dropped the last feet to a grassy hillside. It took me a moment to get the helmet clear; then I took a deep breath of cool, fresh air—the air of a world regained from twenty-two days in the past.

Down the road, with the suit bundled under my arm, I flagged a horse-drawn wagon, let the driver ramble on with the assumption that I was one of those crazy sky-diver fellows; he spent the whole trip into town telling me how you'd never get him up in one of those things, then asked me for a free ride. I promised to remember him next time I was up, and hopped off at the small town post office.

Inside, I gave a rambling excuse for my lack of funds to an ill-tempered looking man in a tight blue uniform, and asked him to put a call through to Intelligence HQ in Stockholm. While I waited, I noticed the wall calendar—and felt the sweat pop out on my forehead. I was a full

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day later than Dzok had calculated; the doom that hung over the Imperium was only hours away.

THE plump man came back, with a thin man in tow, told me to repeat my request to his superior. I began to get irritated.

"Gentlemen, I have important information for Baron Richthofen. Just put my call through—"

"That will not be possible," the slim fellow said. He had a nose sharp enough to poke a hole through quarter-inch plywood. It was red on the end, as though he'd been trying.

"You can charge the call to my home telephone," I said. "My name is Bayard, number 12, Nybrovagen—"

"You have identity papers?"

"I'm sorry; I've lost my wallet. But—"

"You place me in a difficult position," the thin fellow said with a smile that suggested that he was enjoying it. "If the Herr is unable to identify himself—"

"This is important!" I rapped. "You have nothing to lose but a phone call. If I *am* on the level, you'll look like a damned fool for obstructing me!"

That got to him. He conferred with his chubby chum, then announced that he would check with the number I had given him in Stockholm, supposedly that of Herr Bayard. . . .

I waited while he dialed, talked, nodded, waited, talked some more in an undertone, placed the receiver back on the phone with a triumphant look. He spoke briefly to the other man, who hurried away.

"Well?" I demanded.

"You say that *you* are Herr Bayard?" He cooed, fingertips together.

"Colonel Bayard to you, Buster," I snapped. "This is a matter of life and death—"

"Whose life and death, ah . . . *Colonel* Bayard . . . ?"

"To hell with that . . ." I started around the counter; he leaned on one foot and I heard a distant bell sound; the fat man reappeared, looking flushed. There was another man behind him, a heavy fellow in a flat cap and gun belt, with cop written all over him. He put a gun on me and ordered me to stand clear of the wall; then he frisked me quickly—missing the slug gun which Dzok had restored—and motioned me to the door.

"Hold on," I said. "What's this farce all about? I've got to get that call through to Stockholm—"

"You claim that you are Colonel Bayard, of Imperial Intelligence?" the cop rapped out.

"Right the first time," I started.

"It may interest you to know," the thin postal official said, sa-

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voring the drama of the moment, "that Herr Colonel Bayard is at this moment dining at his home in the capital."

CHAPTER XIII

THE cell they gave me wasn't bad by Hagroon standards, but that didn't keep me from pounding on the bars and yelling. I had my slug gun, of course—but since they wouldn't recognize it as a weapon even if I showed it, there was no chance of bluff; and I wasn't quite ready yet to kill; there were still several hours to go before the crisis and my call wouldn't take long—once they saw reason. The fat man had gone away, promising that an official from the military sub-station at Sodra would be along soon; meantime I pounded and demanded that another call be put through—but nobody listened. Now my chance to use the gun was gone; the man with the keys kept to the outer office.

A slack-looking youth in a baggy pants and wide blue and yellow suspenders brought me in a small smorgasbord about noon. I waved it away, tried to bribe him with promises to make the call for me. He gave me a crooked smile and turned away. I flipped the slug-gun into my hand, told him what it was. He shook his head, walked off. I could have shot him, but it wouldn't have helped anything but my feelings.

It was well after dark when there was a sudden stir in the outer room of the jail; then the metal door clanged open and a familiar face appeared—a field agent I had met once or twice in the course of my duites with Intelligence. He was a tall, worried-looking man, wearing drab civvies and carrying a briefcase. He stopped dead when he saw me, then came on hesitantly.

"Hello, Captain," I greeted him. "We'll all have a good chuckle over this later, as the saying goes, but right now I need out of here fast . . ."

The cop who had arrested me was behind him, and the fat man from the post office.

"You know my name?" the agent said awkwardly.

"I'm afraid not—but I think you know me; we've met once or twice—"

"Listen to the fellow," the fat man said. "A violent case—"

"Silence!" the agent snapped. He came up close, looked me over carefully.

"You wished to place a call to Intelligence HQ," he said. "What did you wish to speak about?"

"I'll tell them myself," I snapped. "Get me out of here, Captain—in a hell of a hurry! This is top priority business . . .!"

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"You may tell me what it is you wished to report," he said.

"I'll report directly to Baron Richthofen."

He lifted his shoulders. "You place me in an awkward position—"

"To hell with your position! Can't you understand plain Swedish? I'm telling you—"

"You will address an officer of Imperial Intelligence with more respect!" the cop broke in.

The agent turned to the two men behind him. "Clear out, both of you!" he snapped. They left, looking crestfallen. He turned back to me, wiped a hand across his forehead.

"This is very difficult for me," he said. "You bear a close resemblance to Colonel Bayard—"

"Resemblance! Hell, I *am* Bayard!"

He shook his head. "I was assured on that point, most specifically," he said. "I don't know what this is all about, my friend, but it will be better for you to tell me the whole story—"

"The story is that I have information of vital importance to the Imperium! Every minute counts, man! Forget the red tape! Get me a line to Headquarters!"

"You are an imposter; we know that much. You asked to have a call placed; a routine check at Colonel Bayard's home indicated that he was there—"

"I can't try to explain all the paradoxes involved; just put my call through!"

"It is not possible to route every crank call to the Chief of Intelligence!" the man snapped. "What is this message of yours? If it seems to warrant attention, I will personally—"

"Let me talk to Bayard, then," I cut in.

"Ah, then you abandon your imposture?"

"Call it what you like. Let me talk to him!"

"That is not possible—"

"I didn't know we had anyone in the service as stupid as you are," I said clearly. "All right, I'll give you the message—and by all you hold sacred, you'd better believe me."

HE didn't. He was polite, and heard me all the way through; then he signalled for the jailer and got ready to leave.

"You can't walk out of here without at least checking my story!" I roared at him. "What kind of intelligence man are you? Take a look at the suit I had with me, damn you! That will show you I'm not imagining the whole thing!"

He looked at me, a troubled look. "How can I believe you? Your claim to be Bayard is a lie, and the story you tell is fantastic! Would *you* have believed it?"

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I stared back at him. "I don't know," I said, honestly. "But I'd at least have checked what I could."

He turned to the cop, who was back, hovering at the door.

"You have this . . . shuttle suit?"

The cop nodded. "Yes sir; I have it here on my desk; I've checked it for . . ." his voice faded as he and the agent went out and the door shut behind them. For another half hour I paced the cell, wondering whether I should have shot a couple of them and tried to scare the cop into unlocking me; but from what I knew of the men of the Imperium, it wouldn't have worked; they were too damned brave for their own good.

Then the door clanked open again. A stranger was there this time—a small man with a runny nose and eyes, and glasses as thick as checkers.

". . . very odd, very odd," he was saying. "But meaningless, of course. The circuity is quite inert . . ."

"This is Herr Professor Doctor Runngvist," the agent said. "He's checked your . . . ah . . . suit, and assures me that it's crank-work; a home-made hoax of some sort, incapable of—"

"Damn you!" I yelled. "Sure the suit's inert-without me in it! I'm part of the circuitry! It attuned to me!"

"Eh? Tuned to you? A part of the circuity?" the old man adjusted his glasses at an angle to get a better view of me.

"Look, pops, this is a highly sophisticated device. It utilizes the wearer's somatic and neural fields as a part of the total circuitry. Without me inside, it won't work. Let me have it; I'll demonstrate it for you—"

"Sorry, I can't allow that," the agent said quickly. "Look here, fellow, hadn't you better drop this show now, and tell me what it's all about? You're in pretty deep water already, I'd say, impersonating an officer—"

"You know Bayard, on sight, don't you?" I cut in.

"Yes . . ."

"Do I look like him?"

He looked worried. "Yes, to an extent; I presume it was that which inspired this imposture; but—"

"Listen to me, Captain," I said as levelly as I could through the bars. "This is the biggest crises the Imperium has faced since Chief inspector Bale ran amok. . . ."

The captain frowned. "How did you know of that. . .?"

"I was there. My name's Bayard, remember? Now get me out of here—"

There was a shrilling of a telephone bell in the outer room; feet clumped; voices rumbled; then the door flew open.

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"Inspector? It's a call—from Stockholm . . ."

My inquisitors turned. "Yes?"

"That fellow—Colonel Bayard!" an excited voice said. Someone shushed him; they stood in the hall, conversing in whispers. Then the intelligence captain came back with the cop behind him.

"You'd better start telling all you know," he snapped, looking grimmer than ever.

"What's happened?"

"Stockholm is under attack by an armed force of undetermined size!"

IT was close to midnight now; I had been looking for a chance for a break for the past hour, but Captain Burman, the agent, was taking no chances; he had locked the outer door to the cell block and nobody was allowed even to come close to my cell. I think he was beginning to suspect that everything wasn't as simple as it appeared.

I watched the door across the aisle as a key clattered in it and it swung wide; it was Burman, white faced, and two strangers, both in civilian clothes. My wrist tensed, ready to flip the gun into my palm, but they kept their distance.

"This is the man," Burman waved at me like a tenant complaining about a prowler. "I've gotten nothing from him but nonsense—or what I thought was nonsense, until now!"

The newcomers looked me over. One was a short, thick-set, hairless man in wide lapels and baggy-kneed pants; the other was trim, neat, well-set-up. I decided to make my pitch to the former; no underling could afford to look that messy.

"Listen, you," I started. "I'm Colonel Bayard, of Imperial Intelligence—

"I will listen, of that you may be assured," the little man said. "Start at the beginning and repeat what you have told the Captain."

"It's too late for talk." I flipped the gun into my hand; all three of them jumped, and a heavy automatic appeared in the snappy dresser's hand.

"Ever seen one of these before?" I showed the slug gun, keeping the armed man covered.

The thick man jerked his head in a quick nod.

"Then you know they're only issued to a few people in Net Surveillance work—including me. I could have shot my way out of here when I first arrived, but I thought I'd get fair hearing without killing anybody. Now it's too late for humanitarianism. One of you open up, or I start shooting—and I'm faster than you are, Buster," I added for the benefit of the tall man with the gun.

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"Here, you're only making it worse—"

"It couldn't be worse. Get the key; call that dumb flatfoot out front."

The thick man shook his head. "Shoot then, sir. Major Gunnarson will then be forced to return your fire, and so two men will die. But I will not release you."

"Why not? You can watch me. All I want to do is call Intelligence—"

"I do not know what set of signals you may have worked out, or with whom, and I do not intend to find out at the expense of the Imperial security."

"There's not any imperial security, as long as you keep me here. I've told my story to Burman! Take action! do something!"

"I have already attempted to relay your statement to Baron Richthofen at Stockholm," the rumpled man said.

"What do you mean, attempted?"

"Just that. I was unable to get through. All telephonic connection is broken, I found. I sent a messenger; he failed to return. Another messenger has reached me but now; he was dispatched an hour ago, and heard the news over his auto radio set just before. . . ."

"Just before what?"

"Before the gas attack," he said in a harsh voice. Abruptly there was a gun in his hand—a heavy revolver. He had drawn it so quickly that I couldn't even say where he'd gotten it.

"Now, tell me all you know of these matters, Mr. Bayard, or whatever your name might be! You have ten seconds to begin!"

I kept my gun on his partner; I knew that if I moved it as much as a millimeter, the baggy man would gun me down. I tried to match the steely look in his eye.

"I told Burman the whole story; if you choose not to believe it, that's not my fault. But there may still be time. What's the situation in the city?"

"There is *no* time, Mr. Bayard. No time at all. . . ." To my horror I saw a tear glisten at the corner of the thick man's eye.

"What . . ." I couldn't finish the question.

"The invaders have released a poisonous gas which has blanketed the city. They have erected barricades against any attempt at relief; strange men in helmeted suits are shooting down every man who approaches . . ."

"But what about . . . the people . . . What about my wife? What—"

He was shaking his head. "The Emperor with his family, the government, everyone, all must be presumed dead, Mr. Bayard, inside the barricaded city!"

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THERE was a shattering crash from the outer room. The thick man whirled from me, jumped to the door, shot a look out, then went through at a dead run, Burman at his heels; I yelled at Major Gunnarson to stop or I'd shoot, but he didn't and neither did I. There was a clatter of feet, a crash like breaking glass, a couple of shots; someone yelled "the ape men!" There were more shots, then a heavy slam like a body hitting the floor. I backed into the corner of my cell, cursing the fatal mistake I'd made in letting myself get cornered here. I aimed at the door, waited for the first Hagroon to come through—

The door flew open—and a familiar narrow-shouldered figure in stained whites sauntered into view.

"Dzok!" I yelled. "Get me out of here—or—" A horrible suspicion dawned. Dzok must have seen it in my face.

"Easy, old fellow!" He shouted as my gun covered him. "I'm here to give you a spot of assistance, old chap—and from the looks of things, you can jolly well use it!"

"What's going on out there?" I yelled. There was someone behind Dzok; a tall, young fellow in a green coat and scarlet knee pants came through the door, holding a long-barelled rifle with a short bayonet fixed to the end of it. There were white facings on the coat, wide loops of braid, and rows of bright gold buttons. There was a wide cocked hat on his head, with a gold fringe and a crimson rosette, and he wore white stockings and polished black shoes with large gilt buckles. The owner of the finery flashed me a big smile, then turned to Dzok and gave a sloppy salute with the palm of his hand out.

"I reckon we peppered 'em good, sor. Now what say ye we have a look about out back here for any more o' the gasoons as might be skulkin' ready to do in a honest man?"

"Never mind that, sergeant," Dzok said. "This is a jail delivery, nothing more. Those chaps out there are our allies, actually. Pity about the shooting, but it couldn't be helped." He was talking to me now. "I attempted to make a few inquiries, but found everyone in a state of the most extreme agitation; they opened fire with hardly a second glance, amid shouts of 'hairy ape-man'! Disgraceful—"

"The Hagroon have hit the capital" I cut him off. "Laid down a gas attack, barricaded the streets, everybody presumed dead . . ." I wasn't thinking now—just reacting. The Hagroon had to be stopped that was all that mattered. Not that anything really mattered any more,

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with Barbro gone with the rest—but she was a fighter; she'd have expected me to go on fighting, too, as long as I could still move and breathe.

Dzok looked stricken. "Beastly, old fellow! I can't tell you how sorry I am . . ." He commiserated with me for a while; then the sergeant came back from the outer room with a key, opened my cell door.

"And so I came too late," Dzok said bitterly. "I had hoped . . ." He let the sentence trail off, as we went into the outer room.

"Who are these fellows?" I gaped at the half-dozed bright-plumaged soldiers posted about the jail covering the windows and the door.

"These are my volunteers, Bayard—my Napoleonic levies. I was on a recruiting mission, you'll recall; after I left you, I returned to Zaj—and found—you'll never guess, old fellow!"

"I'll take three guesses," I said. "And they'll all be the Hagroon!"

Dzok nodded glumly. "The bounders had overrun Authority headquarters, including the Web terminal, of course; there was nothing I could do; I beat a strategic retreat. Then I thought of you. I adjusted my controls for maximum retrogression, returned to the world of Napoleon Fifth, and gathered in these fine chaps, then came on here, following your trail. I was a bit surprised to find a viable line here, frankly—but—" he paused, looking embarrassed. "Actually, old chap, I'd hoped to enlist the aid of your Imperium; we Xonilealians are ill-equipped to fight a Web war, I'm sorry to say. Always before—"

"I know; they caught us off-guard too. I wondered all along why you figured you were immune—"

"The audacity of the blighters! Who'd have expected—"

"You should have." I said shortly.

"Ah, well, what's done is done." Dzok rubbed his hands together with every appearance of relish. "Inasmuch you're not in a position to assist me, perhaps my chaps and I can still be of some help here. Better start by giving me a complete resume of the situation. . . ."

AFTER ten minutes' talk, while the troops kept up a sporadic fire from the jail windows, Dzok and I had decided on a plan of action. It wasn't a good one, but under the circumstances it was better than nothing. The first step was to find the S-suit. We wasted another ten minutes searching the place before I decided to try the vault. It was open, and the suit was laid out on a table.

"Right," Dzok said with satis-

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faction. "I'll need tools, Bayard, and a heat source and a magnifying glass. . . ."

We rummaged, found a complete tool kit in a wall locker and a glass in the chief's desk drawer. I made a hasty adaptation of a hotplate used for heating coffee, while Dzok opened up the control console set in the chest area of the suit.

"We're treading on dangerous ground, of course," he said blandly, while he snipped hair-fine wires, tossed them into new arrangements. "What I'm attempting is theoretically possible, but it's never been tried—not with an S-suit."

I watched, admiring the dexterity of his long, grayish fingers as he rearranged the internal components of the incredibly compact installation. For half an hour, while guns cracked intermittently, he made tests, muttered, tried again, studying the readings on the miniature scales set on the cuff of the suit; then he straightened, gave me a wry look.

"It's done, old chap. I can't guarantee the results of my make-shift mods, but there's at least an even chance that it will do what we want."

I asked for an explanation of what he had done, followed closely as he pointed out the interplay of circuits which placed stresses on the M-C field in such a way as to distort its normal function along a line of geometric progression leading to infinity. . .

"It's over my head, Dzok," I told him. "I was never a really first-class M-C man, and when it comes to your Xonijeelian complexities—"

"Don't trouble your head, Bayard. All you need to know is that adjusting this setting . . ." he pointed with a pin drill at a tiny knurled knob ". . . controls the angle of incidence of the pinch-field—"

"In plain English, if something goes wrong and I'm not dead, I can twiddle that and try again."

"Very succinctly put. Now let's be going. How far did you say it is to the city?

"About twelve kilometers."

"Right. We'll have to commandeer a pair of light lorries; there are several parked in the court just outside; some sort of crude steam-cars, I think—"

"Internal combustion; and not so crude; they'll do a hundred kilometers an hour."

"They'll serve." He went into the guard room, checked the scene from the windows.

"Quiet out there at the moment; no point in waiting about. Let's sally at once." I nodded, and Dzok gave his orders to the gaily-costumed riflemen, five of whom quietly took up positions at the windows, and door facing

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the courtyard, while the others formed up a cordon around Dzok and me.

"Hell, we may as well do our bit," I suggested. There were carbines in the gun locker; I took one, tossed one to Dzok, buckled on a belt and stuffed it with ammo.

"Tell your lads to shoot low," I said. "Don't let anybody get in our way, but try not to kill anybody; they don't know what's going on out there—"

"And there's no time to explain," Dzok finished for me, looking at his men. "Shoot to wound, right, lads?" Now, Sergeant, take three men and move out. Cover the first lorry and hold your fire until they start something. Mr. Bayard and I will come next, with ten men, while the rest of you lay down a covering fire; those in the rear guard stand fast until number two lorry pulls up to the door; then pile in quickly and we're off."

"Very well, sor," the sergeant said. He was working hard on a plug of tobacco he'd found in the police chief's desk drawer. He turned and bawled instructions to his men, who nodded, grinning.

"These boys don't behave like recruits." I said. "They look like veterans to me."

Dzok nodded, smiling his incredible smile. "Former members of the Welsh regiment of the Imperial Guard. They were eager for a change."

"I wonder what you offered them?"

"The suggestion of action after a few months changing of the guard at Westminister was sufficient."

THE sergeant was at the door now, with two of his men. He said a quick word, and the three darted out, sprinted for the lorry, a high-sided dark blue panel truck lettered FLOTTSBRO POLIS. A scattering of shots rang out; grass tips flew as a bullet clipped the turf by the sergeant's ankle. The man on his left stumbled, went down, rolled, came up limping, his thigh wet with a dark glisten against the scarlet cloth. He made it in two jumps to the shelter of the truck, hit the grass, levelled his musket and fired. A moment later, all three were in position, their guns cracking in a one-round-per-second rhythm. The opposing fire slackened.

"Now," Dzok said. I brought the carbine up across my chest and dashed for the second truck. There was a white puff of smoke from a window overlooking the courtyard, a whine past my head; I ducked, pounded across the grass, leaped the chain at the edge of the pavement, skidded to a halt beside the lorry. Dzok was

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there ahead of me, wrenching at the door.

"Locked!" he called, and stepped back, fired a round into the keyhole, wrenched the door open. I caught a glimpse of his shuttle, a heavy passenger-carrying job, parked across a flowerbed. He followed my gaze.

"Just have to leave it; too bad . . ." He was inside then, staring at the unfamiliar controls.

"Slide over!" I pushed in beside him, feeling the vehicle lurch as the men crowded in behind me, hearing the spang! as a shot hit the metal body. There were no keys in the ignition; I tried the starter; nothing.

"I'll have to short the wiring," I said, and slid to the ground, jumped to the hood, unlatched the wide side panel, lifted it. With one hard jerk, I twisted the ignition wires free, made hasty connections to the battery, then grabbed the starter lever and depressed it. The engine groaned, turned over twice, and caught with a roar. I slammed the hood down as a bullet cut a bright streak in it, jumped for the seat.

"Who's driving the second truck?"

"I have a chap who's a steam-car operator—"

"No good; I'll have to start it for him . . ." I was out again, running for the other lorry, parked twenty feet away. A worried-looking man with damp red hair plastered to a freckled forehead was fumbling with the dash lighter and headlight switch. There was a key in the switch of this one; I twisted it, jammed a foot against the starter. The engine caught, ran smoothly.

"You know how to shift gears?"

He nodded, smiling.

"This is the gas pedal; push on it and you go faster. This is the brake . . ." He nodded eagerly. "If you stall out, push this floor button; the rest is just steering."

He nodded again as glass smashed in front of him, throwing splinters in our faces. Blood ran from a cut across his cheek, but he brushed the chips away, gave me a wave. I ran for it, reached my truck, slammed it in gear, watched a moment to see that the red-head picked up the rear guard; then I gunned for the closed iron gates, hit them with a crash at twenty miles an hour, slammed through, twisted the wheel hard left, and thundered away down the narrow street.

IT took us twenty minutes to cover the twelve kilometers to the edge of the city; for the last hundred yards, we slowed, steered a course among bodies lying in the street, pulled up at a rough barricade of automobiles

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turned on their sides and blackened by fire, bright tongues of flame still licking over the smouldering tires. A church tower clock was tolling midnight—a merry sound to accompany the cheery picture.

I looked at the dark towers of the city behind the barrier, the dark streets; there were at least a dozen dead men in sight, sprawled in the unlovely attitudes of violent death. None were in uniform or armed; they were bystanders, caught in the clouds of poison that had rolled from the city's streets. There were no Hagroon in sight; the streets were as still as a graveyard.

There was a sound to the left; I brought my carbine up, saw a hatless man in a white shirt come up.

"Thank God you've got here at last," he choked. "I got a whiff—sick as a dog. Pulled a couple back, but . . ." he coughed, retched, bending double. "Too late. All dead. Gas is gone now, blown away . . ."

"Get farther back," I said. "Spread the word not to try to attack the barricades." There was another man behind him, and a woman, her face soot-streaked.

"What do you want us to do?" Someone called. They clustered around the car, a dozen battered survivors, thinking we were the police, and ready to help us.

"Just stay back, keep out of harm's way. We're going to try something—"

Someone yelled then, pointing at Dzok. A cry went through the crowd.

"Everybody out—fast!" I barked to the men in the rear of the truck. Then: "This is a friend!" I yelled to the crowd. I jumped down, ran around to the side where the man had raised the first outcry, caught him by the arm as he jerked at the shattered door-handle.

"Listen to me! This isn't the enemy! He's an ally of the Imperium! He's here to help! These are his troops!" I waved at the ten costumed soldiers who had formed a rough circle around the truck. The headlights of the second truck swung into view then; it growled up beside the first, chugged to a stop and stalled out; the doors flew open and men swarmed out.

"He's got hair on his face—just like the others—"

"You saw them?"

"No—but I heard—from the man I pulled back from the barricade—before he died—!

"Well, I don't have hair on my face—unless you want to count three day's beard. This is Commander Dzok! He's on our side. Now, spread the word! I don't want any accidents!"

"Who're you?"

"I'm Colonel Bayard, Imperial—

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Intelligence. I'm here to do what I can—"

"What can we do?" several voices called. I repeated my instructions to stay back.

"What about you?" the man who had spotted Dzok asked me. "What's your plan, colonel?"

Dzok was out of the car now; he handed the modified S-suit to me, turned and bowed in courtly fashion to the crowd.

"Enchanted, sirs and madame, to make your acquaintance," he called. Someone tittered, but Dzok ignored it. "I have the honor as Colonel Bayard has said, to offer my services in the fight against the rude invader. But it is the colonel himself who must carry out our mission here tonight. The rest of us can merely assist . . ."

"What's he going to do?"

I had the suit halfway on now; Dzok was helping me, pulling it up, getting my arms into the sleeves, settling the heavy chest pack in place, zipping long zippers closed.

"Using this special equipment," Dzok said in his best theatrical manner, "Colonel Bayard will carry out a mission of the utmost peril . . ."

"Skip the pitch and hand me the helmet," I interrupted him.

"We want to help," someone called.

"I'd like to go along," another voice said.

"Our chief need at the moment," Dzok's voice rang above the rest, "is a supply of coffee; my brave lads are a trifle fatigued, not having rested since leaving their home barracks."

"Why can't some of us go along, colonel," a man said, stepping close. "You could use an escort—and not those over-dressed fancy-dans, either!"

"The colonel must go alone," Dzok said. "Alone he will carry out a spy mission among the enemy—on the other side of time!" He turned to me, and in a lower voice said: "Don't waste any time, old fellow. It's after midnight now—in about two hours the world ends. . . ."

* * *

The transparent helmet was in place, all the contacts tight. Dzok made a couple of quick checks, gave me the O sign with his fingers that meant all systems were go. I put my hand on the 'activate' button and took my usual deep breath. If Dzok's practice was as good as his theory, the rewired S-suit would twist the fabric of reality in a different manner than its designers had intended, stress the E-field of the normal continuum in a way that would expell me, like a watermelon seed squeezed in the fingers, into that curious non-temporal state of null entropy—the other side of time, as he poetically called it.

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If it worked, that was. And there was only one way to find out. I pressed the button—

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was a moment of total vertigo; the world inverted around me, dwindled to a pin hole through which all reality flowed, to expand vastly, whirling.

I was standing in the street, looking across at the black hulks of burned-out cars glowing with a bluish light like a corpse nine days under water. I turned, saw the empty police lorries, the dead bodies in the street, the stark, leafless trees lining the avenue, the blank eyes of the houses behind them. Dzok, the soldiers, the crowd—all of them had vanished in the instant that the suit's field has sprung into being—or, more correctly, I had vanished from among them. Now I was alone, in the same deserted city I had seen when I awakened after my inexplicable encounter with the flaming man in the basement of Imperial Intellience Headquarters. I looked again at the clock on the church tower; the hands stood frozen at twelve twenty-five. And the clock I had seen in the office just after the encounter had read twelve-oh-five. I was already too late to intercept the flaming man before he did whatever he had been there to accomplish.

But I wasn't too late to spy out the Hagroon position, discover where the discontinuity engine was planted, then return, lead an assault force. . .

There were too many variables in the situation; action was the only cure for the hollow sensation of foredoomed failure growing in the pit of my stomach.

A pebble hopped suddenly, struck the toe of my shoe as I took a step, small dust clouds rose, swirled toward my feet as I crossed the dry, crumbling soil where grass had grown only moments before. The eerie light that seemed to emanate from the ground showed me a pattern of depressions in the soil that seemed to form before my foot reached them. . . .

I looked behind me; there were no prints to show where I had come; but a faint trail seemed to lead ahead. A curious condition, this Null-time. . . .

I crossed the sidewalk, skirted a dead man lying almost on the barricade, clambered over the burned wreck of a car, a boxy sedan with an immense spare tire strapped to the rear. There were more bodies on the other side; men who had died trying to climb the wall, or who had chosen that spot to make a stand. Among them, a lone Hagroon lay, the bulky body contorted in the heavy atmosphere suit, a bloody hole in the center of his

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chest. Someone on the Imperial side had drawn enemy blood. The thought was cheering in this scene of desolation. I went on, glanced up at the tower clock as I passed—

The hands stood at one minute after twelve. As I watched, the minute hand jerked back, pointed straight up.

And suddenly, I understood. Dzok's changes to the S-suit had had the desired effect of shifting me to null time; but he—and I—had forgotten the earlier adjustment he had made to the suit's controls—the adjustment that had caused the suit to carry me in a retrograde direction, back along the temporal profile, during my trip from the jungle world. Now—with the suit activated, holding me in my unnatural state of anti-entropy—the retrograde motion had resumed. I was travelling backward through time.

I WALKED on, watching the curious behavior of objects as they impinged on the E-field of the suit, or crossed from the field to the external environment. A pebble kicked by me took up a motion, flew from the field—where it resumed its natural temporal direction, sprang back, seemed to strike my foot, then dropped from play. The air around me whispered in constant turmoil as vagrant currents were caught, displaced backward in time, only to be released, with the resultant local inequalities in air pressure. I wondered how I would appear to an outside observer—or if I could be seen at all. And my weapon; what effect would—or *could* it have, fired in the future, dealing death in the past—

Soundlessly, a figure backed into view around a corner two blocks away, walked briskly toward me, the feet moving back, the arms swinging—like a movie run in reverse. I flattened myself against a wall, watched as the walker came closer. A Hagroon! I flipped the slug gun into my hand, waited. . . .

He stepped past me, kept going, his head turning as though scaning the sidewalk for signs of life—but he paid no attention to me. I looked around; there were none of his fellows in sight; it was as good a time as any to make a test. I stepped boldly out, aimed the gun at his retreating chest at a distance of twenty feet, twenty-five. . . .

There was no reaction. I was invisible to him, while he, somehow, remained visible to me. I could only assume that light rays striking me were affected by the field, their temporal progression reversed, with the effect of simply blanking them off, while normal light emanating from the scene to me. . . .

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But how was I able to see, with light travelling *away* from my eyes. . . .

I remembered a statement made by an Imperium Net physicist, explaining why it was possible to scan the continua through which a moving shuttle passed in an immeasurably short instant of time; 'Light is a condition, not an event . . .'

Whatever the reason. The Hagroon couldn't see me. A break for our side at last. Now to see what I could accomplish on the strength of one small advantage and whatever luck I could find along the way.

IT was half an hour's walk to the Net Garages. There were few corpses in the street along the way. Apparently the people had been caught in their beds by the attack; those few who had been abroad had fallen back toward the barricades—and died there. I passed a pair of Hagroon, walking briskly backward, then a group of a half dozen, then a column of twenty or thirty, all moving in the opposite direction—from my own course—which meant that, in normal progression, they were headed for the area of the Net Garages, coming from the direction of the Imperial HQ.

Two blocks from there, the crowd of Hagroon almost filled the street.

Moving with the stream—which seemed to part before me, to the accompaniment of perplexed looks on the Hagroon faces I glimpsed through the dark faceplates—I made my way across the North Bridge, in through the dim-glowing wrought-iron gates before the looming bulk of the headquarters building. The mob of Hagroon here was tight-packed, a shoving, sullen mass of near-humanity—jostling their way backward through the wide doors, overflowing the gravel walks and the barren rectangles of dry dirt that were immaculately manicured flower beds in normal time. I caught a glimpse of a clock in the front of a building across the plaza; eleven fifteen.

I had moved back through time three-quarters of an hour, while 30 subjective minutes passed.

I made my way through the streaming crowd of suited Hagroon, reached the door, slipped through into the same high-ceiled foyer that I had left, alone, six weeks earlier. Now it was crowded with silent Hagroon masses, overseen by two heavily brassed individuals who stood on the lower steps of the flight leading to the upper floors, waving their arms and grimacing. Sound, it appeared, failed to span the interface between 'nor-

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mal' Null time and my reversed field effect.

The stream pressed toward a side corridor. I made my way there, reached a small door set in the hall with the sign SERVICE STAIR beside it—

I remembered that door. It was the one through which I had pursuded the flaming man, so many weeks before. I pushed through it, felt the ghostly jostle of Hagroon bodies that seemed to slip aside an instant before I touched them, descended one flight, followed the direction of the stream of aliens along to a door—the one beyond which the fiery man had turned at bay. . . .

The stream of Hagroon was smaller now, less tightly packed. I stood aside, watched as the creatures shuffled backward through the narrow entry into the small room—and more and more, packing into the confined space. . . .

It wasn't possible. I had seen hundreds of the brutes in the streets, packing the entry way, crowding the corridors, all streaming here-or *from* here in the normal time-sequence—from this one small room. . . .

There were only a few Hagroon in the hall now, standing, listening to a silent harangue from a brass-spangled officer; they shuffled back, almost eagerly, passed into the room. The officers appeared from above, joined in a brief huddle, backed through the door into the gloom. I followed—and stopped dead.

A glistening, ten-foot disk of insubstantiality shimmered in the air, floating an inch or two above the dull stone floor, not quite grazing the dusty beamed ceiling of the abandoned store room. As I watched, one of the remaining Hagroon officers backed quickly to it, crouched slightly, leaped backward through the disk—and disappeared as magically as a rabbit into a magician's hat. There were only two Hagroon left now; one of them backed to the disk, hopped through. The last spoke into a small hand-held instrument, stood for a moment gazing about the room, ignoring me utterly; then he too sprang through the disc and was gone.

I was seeing wonders by comparison with which the shuttles of the Imperium were as prosaic as wicker baby buggies, but there was no time to stand in awe, gaping. This was an entry portal from some other space to null time Stockholm. The Hagroon had entered through it; from where, I didn't know. There was a simple empirical method of answering that question . . .

I went to the disk—like the surface of a rippled pond, upended in gloom. There was nothing visible beyond that mysterious plane. I gritted my teeth, took an

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instant to hope I was guessing right, and stepped through.

I KNEW at once that I was back in normal time—still running backwards, doubtless, still in the same small room—but I was standing in honest darkness, away from the pervasive death-light of null-time. There were Hagroon all about me, bulky, suited figures, almost filling the confined space of the room, overflowing into the corridor, seemingly unbothered by the lack of illumination. I recognized the officers I had seen moments before, the last to pass through the portal—or the first, in normal time; the pioneers, sent through ahead of the main body to reconnoitre—before the horde poured through, to stream back to the Net Garages. Six weeks earlier—or tonight; either way of looking at it was equally valid—I would meet them there, embarking in their shuttles to return to the Hagroon world-line, their job here finished. But now, because of the miracle of my retrograde motion in the time-stream, I was seeing the play acted out in reverse; watching the victorious troops, flushed from their victory over the sleeping city, about to back out into the streets, and reenact their gas attack.

Many of the Hagroon, I noted, carried heavy cannisters; others, as I watched, took empty containers from a heap in the corridor, hitched them into place on their backs. They were filing away now, by twos and threes, backing out into the corridors, up the stairs, back into the dead streets. I started to follow—then checked myself. There was something, tugging at the edge of my awareness; something I must do, now—quickly—before my chance slipped away. Events were flowing inexorably toward their inevitable conclusion, while I hesitated, racking my brain. It was hard to think, hard to orient my thoughts in the distorted perspective of reversed time; but I had to stop now, force myself to analyze what I was seeing, reconstruct the attack.

The Hagroon had arrived at the Net Garages; I had seen their shuttles there. It was the perfect spot for an assault in force via shuttle, and due to the characteristic emanations of the Net communicator carriers, easy to pin-point for navigation purposes.

Once there, they had marched across the empty null-time city to Intelligence Headquarters, a convenient central location from which to attack, and with plenty of dark cellar rooms . . . and perhaps there was also an element of sardonic humor in their choice of staging areas. . . .

Then the troops had poured through the Portal, emerged into

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the midnight streets of the real-time city, spewing gas; the attack the end of which I was now witnessing.

But why the gas attack on a city about to suffer anihilation along with the rest of the planet?

Simple; the Hagroon needed peace and quiet in which to erect the *discontinuity engine*—and they needed the assurance that the infernal machine would remain undisturbed for the necessary time to allow them to pass back through their portal, regain their shuttles, and leave the doomed A-line. By gassing the city, they had ensured their tranquility while they perpetrated the murder of a universe.

Because it was more than a world they killed. It was a planet, a solar system, a sky filled with stars, to the ends of conceivable space and beyond—a unique, irreplacable aspect of reality, to be wiped forever from the face of the continuum, because one world, one tiny dust-mote in that universe posed a possible threat to Hagroon safety. It was an abominable plot—and the moments during which I could take action to thwart it were fast slipping away. Somewhere, at this moment, a crew was at work, preparing the doomsday device. And if I delayed, even for minutes, in finding it—it would be too late—or too early. The machine would be separated into its component parts, carried away to the shuttles by backwards-walking men, transported out of range—

I had to find the engine—now!

I LOOKED around. Hagroon laden with empty cannisters were still backing away along the corridor; their officers waved their arms, mouths moving behind face-plates. One individual, helmetless, caught my attention. He came from the opposite direction along the narrow hall, stepping briskly up to the Hagroon directing the cannister operation. Two rank and file Hagroon preceeded him; they turned away, joined a group plucking empty cannisters from a heap and fitting them on their backs. The helmetless one talked to the officer; both nodded, talked some more; then the former backed away down the dark hall—away from the stair. I hesitated just a moment, then followed.

He backed off fifty feet, turned into a storeroom much like the one in which the portal had been erected. There were four other Hagroon there, crouched around a heavy tripod on which a massive construction rested, its casing lying on the floor to one side. Luck was with me. I had found the discontinuity engine.

The next step was clear to me in the same instant that I saw the engine. As two of the Ha-

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groon hovering over the machine paused, staring with comically puzzled expressions, I went to the stand, planted my feet, gripped the massive casing, and lifted. It came away easily; my slightly accelerated time rate, although reversed, gave me an added quota of brute strength. I stepped back, hugging the horror device to my chest, feeling the buzz of its timer—and to my blank amazement, saw it still resting where it had been—while I held its counterpart in my hands. The Hagroon technicians were working away now, apparently undisturbed. But then, I hadn't yet appeared, to create paradox before their startled eyes. . . .

I turned to the door, made my way along the corridor, climbed the steps, set off at the fastest dog-trot I could manage for the Net Garages.

I MADE it in twenty minutes, in spite of the awkward burden, with forcing myself to ignore the gas attack going on all around me. Suited Hagroon clumped backward through the well-lit streets under a vague cloud of brownish gas that seemed to slowly coalese, drawing together as I watched. I half-ran, half-walked, shifting my grip on the heavy casing, sweating heavily now inside the suit. The gas was all around me, and I hoped the seals of my garment were as secure as Dzok had assured me they were.

At the garages, a few morose-looking Hagroon loitered about the parked shuttles, peering out through the wide doors toward the sounds of action in the city streets. I passed them unnoticed, went to the last shuttle in line—the same machine I had ridden once before. It, I knew, had preset controls, which would automatically home it on its A-line of origin—the Hagroon world. I pulled open the door, lowered my burden to the grey metal floor, pushed it well inside, then checked the wall clock. Dzok and I had calculated that the engine had gone into action—or would go into action—at two A.M. precisely. It was now ten forty-five; three hours and fifteen minutes until M minute.

And the transit of the shuttle from the Zero-zero line to the Hagroon line had taken three hours and twenty-five minutes.

I had ten minutes to kill. . . .

The discontinuity engine was already counting down toward its moment of cataclysmic activity—the titanic outpouring of energy which would release the stasis which constituted the fabric of reality for this line of alternate existence. I had plucked it from the hands of its makers just as they were completing their installation. When the time came, it would perform. The

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shuttle was the problem now. I climbed inside, looked over the controls; they, at least, were simple enough. A trip-wire, attached to the main field switch. . . .

I went back out, found a length of piano wire on a work bench at one side of the garage, secured it to the white-pointed lever that controlled the shuttle's generators, led the wire out through the door. Five minutes to go, now. It was important to get the timing as exact as possible. I watched the hands of the clock move back; ten thirty-four; thirty-three; thirty-two; thirty-one. There was a faint vibration from the shuttle. . . .

I closed the door carefully, checked to be sure the wire was clear, then gripped it, gave it a firm pull; the shuttle—seemed to waver; then it shimmered, winked for an instant—then sat, solid and secure, unmoving. I let out a breath; the example of the engine had forewarned me. The results of my actions on external objects weren't visible to me; but I had sent the shuttle on its way. This was its post reality I saw before me now.

CHAPTER XV

BACK in the street, the attack was in full swing. I saw a man lying in the gutter rise, like a dummy on a rope, clutch at his throat, run backwards into a building, a corpse risen from the dead. The brown cloud hung low over the pavement now, a flat stratum of deadly gas. A long plume formed, flowed toward a Hagroon, whipped into the end of the hand-held horn of his dispenser. Other plumes shaped up, flowed toward other attackers. I was watching the gas attack in reverse—the killers, scavenging the streets of the poison that would—or had—decimated the population. I followed them as the poisonous cloud above gathered, broke apart, flowed back into the cannisters from which it had come. I saw the invaders, laden now, slogging in their strange reverse gait back toward the dark bulk of Intelligence HQ; and I followed, crowding with them along the walk, through the doors, along the corridor, down the narrow steps, back to the deserted store room where they poured in a nightmare stream through the shining disc, back to null time and their waiting shuttles.

There was a paralyzing choice of courses of action open to me now and my choice had to be the right one—with the life of a universe the cost of an error.

The last of the Hagroon passed through the portal, returning to the null time from which they had come, to march back to the Net Garages, board their shuttles and disappear back toward

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their horrendous home-world. The portal stood deserted in the empty room, in a silence as absolute as deafness. I stood by it, waiting, as minutes ticked past —minutes of subjective time, during which I moved inexorably back, back—to the moment when the Hagroon had first activated the portal—and I saw it dwindle abruptly, shrink to a point of incredible brilliance, wink out. I blinked my eyes against the darkness, switched on a small lamp set in the suit's chest panel, intended as an aid in map and instrument reading during transit through lightness continua. It served to show me the dim outlines of the room, the dusty packing cases, the littered floor—nothing else. The portal, I was now certain, required no focussing device to establish its circle of congruency between null and real time.

I waited a quarter of an hour to allow time for the Hagroon to leave the vicinity of the portal, studying my wrist controls and reviewing Dzok's instructions. Then I twisted the knob that would thrust me back through the barrier to null time. I felt the universe turn inside out while the walls whirled around me; then I was standing in null time, alone, breathing hard, but all right so far.

I looked around—and saw what I was looking for; a small, dull-metal case, perched on a stand, half-obscured behind a stack of cases, the Portal machine. I went to it, put a hand on it; it was humming gently, idling, ready to serve its monstrous owners when they arrived, minutes from now in normal time.

There were tools in a leather case clipped to the arm of my suit; I took out a screwdriver, removed the screws; the top of the case came off, showed me a maze of half-familiar components. I studied the circuits, recognized an analog of the miniature moebius-wound coil that formed the heart of my S-suit. A germ of an idea was taking shape-a trick probably impossible, certainly difficult, and likely impractical, even if I had the necessary technical knowledge to carry it out—but an idea of such satisfying scope that I found myself smiling down in Satanic anticipation at the machine in my hands. Dzok had told me a little about the working of the S-suit—and I had watched as he had modified the circuits on two occasions. Now it was my turn to try; and if I could bring it off, well . . .

TWENTY minutes later I had done what I could. It was simple enough in theory; the focussing of the portal was controlled by a simple nuclear-force

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capacitor, tuned by a cyclic gravitic field. By reversing contacts, as Dzok had done when adjusting the suit to carry me backward in time as I crossed the continua, I had modified the orientation of the lens effect. Now, instead of establishing congruency with realtime Stockholm at a level of temporal parity with the null-time plane from which the Hagroon would launch their attack, the portal would set up a contact with a level of time in the future —perhaps as much as a week or two. I could go back now, reverse the action of the suit, and give my warning—and with two weeks or more to convince Imperial Intelligence that I was something other than a madman with a disturbing likeness to one B. Bayard, I could surely make them see reason. True, there would be a number of small problems, such as the simultaneous existence of two battered ex-diplomats of that name—but that was a minor point, if I could avert the total destruction that waited in the wings.

I replaced the cover, for the first time feeling a throb of hope that my mad gamble could pay off—that in moving back through time to a point before the Hagroon attack, I might have actually changed the course of coming events. If I was right, it meant that the invaders I had seen pouring through the portal would never come—had never come; that the gas atatck was relegated to the realm of unrealized possibility; and that the city's inhabitants sleeping peacefully now would wake in the morning, unaware of the death they had died and risen from. . . .

It was a spooky thought. I had done what I could here; now it was time to go. I braced my stomach against the wrench of the S-suit's null-time field, reversed the control. . . .

I blinked, letting my senses swim back into focus. I was back in real time, in the dark, deserted storeroom. There was no sign of the portal—and now, if my guesses were right, there would not be for many days—and then the startled Hagroon would emerge into a withering fire from waiting Imperial troops.

Back in the hall, I licked my lips, suddenly as dry as a mummy's The next step was one I didn't like. Tampering with my suit was dangerous business, and I'd had my share of daring experimentation for the night. But it had to be done.

THE light here was dim—too dim for fine work. I went up the stairs to the ground floor corridor, saw a group of men back across the entry hall, walk backwards up the stairs that led to the second floor. I stifled the impulse to rush out with glad cries;

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they wouldn't hear me. They were as impervious to sounds coming from the past as the Hagroon. I was a phantom, moving in an unreal world of living memories, unreeled in reverse like a glimpse of an old album, riffled through from back to front. But soon—when I had reversed the action of the S-suit—I'd still have the problem of making some one believe me. It was hard, admittedly, for anyone to take my story seriously when my double —another me—was available to deny my authenticity. And nothing would have changed. I—the 'I' of six weeks ago, minus the scars I had collected since then —was at home—*now*—dining in my—or our—sumptuous villa with the incomparable Barbro, about to receive a mysterious phone call—

I shook my head, driving away the bewildering questions that crowded in, demanding resolution. There would no doubt be another call for me now, when I revealed myself. I was a dirty-streaked, badly skinned man in torn clothing of outlandish cut, needing a shave and a bath, and talking nonsense: but this time I'd at least have a few days to convince them.

I stepped back into the cross corridor, found an empty office, closed and locked the door and turned on the light, then, without waiting to consider the consequences of a miscalculation, switched off the suit's power-pack. I unzipped, lifted the light helmet off, pulled the suit off, looked around the room. Everything seemed normal. I reached to the desk, gingerly lifted the black-handled paper-knife that lay there—and with a sinking sensation saw it, still lying on the desk—the duplicate of the one in my hand. I tossed the knife back to the desk—and it winked out of existence—gone along the stream of normal time. It was what I had been afraid of; even with the suit off, I was still living backwards.

Again, I got out the miniature tool kit, used it to open the chest control pack. I knew which wires to reverse; with infinite care, I shifted the hair-fine filaments into new positions, guessing when my recollection of Dzok's work failed. If I had known I'd be doing this job alone, I could have had Dzok run through it with me, even made notes; but both of us, in the excitement of the moment, had forgotten that I would slide away into past time as soon as the suit was activated. Now he was out of reach, hours in the future.

I finished at last, with a splitting headache, a taste in my mouth like an abandoned rat's nest, and my empty stomach simultaneously screeched for food and threatened violence if I

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so much as thought about the subject. I had been operating for the best—or worst—part of forty-eight hours now without food, drink, or rest, and it was beginning to tell on me.

I pulled the suit back on, zipped up too tired now even to worry, flipped the control—and knew at once that something was wrong—bad wrong.

IT wasn't the usual nauseous wrench that I had come to expect; just a claustrophobic sense of pressure and heat. There was a loud humming in my ears, and a cloying in my throat as I drew a breath of scalding hot air.

I stepped to the desk, my legs as sluggish as lead castings, picked up the paper-weight—strangely heavy—

It was scorching hot! I dropped it, watched it slam to the desk-top. I dragged in another breath with a sensation of drowning; the air was as thick as water, hot as live steam . . .

I exhaled a frosty plume of ice crystals. The sleeve of the suit caught my eye; it was glazed over with a dull white coating; I touched it with a finger, felt the heat of it, the slickness. It was ice! Hot ice, forming on my suit! Even as I watched, it thickened, coating my sleeve, building up on my face-plate. I bent my arm to wipe it clear, saw crusts break, leap toward the floor with frantic speed. I managed to get one finger-swipe across the plastic visor; through the clear strip, I saw a mirror across the room. I started for it; my legs strained uselessly. I was rooted to the spot, encased in ice as rigid as armor.

My face plate was frosted over solidly now. I tried to move an arm; it was rigid too. And quite suddenly, I understood. My tinkering with the suit's circuits had been less than perfect; I had re-established my normal direction of temporal progression—but my entropic rate was only a fraction of normal. I was an ice statue—an interesting find for the owner of the office when he broke the door down in the morning, unless I could break free fast!

I tensed my legs, threw my weight sideways—and felt myself toppling, whipping over to slam stunningly against the floor. My ice-armor smashed as I hit, and I moved quickly, brought one numbed arm up, groped for the control knob, fumbled at it with half-frozen fingers, twisted—

There was a sudden release of pressure; the face-plate cleared, dotted over with water droplets that bubbled, danced, disappeared. A blinding cloud was boiling up from me as the ice melted, flashed away as steam. I thrust against the floor, felt my-

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self bound clear, rise half-way to the ceiling, fall back as leisurely as an inflated balloon. I landed on one leg, felt the pressure build as the ankle twisted. I got my other foot under me, staggered, regained my balance, cursing between clenched teeth at the agony in the strained joint. I grabbed for the control, fumbled over the cold surface—

The control knob was gone; the twist I had given it with numbed fingers had broken it.

I limped to the door, caught the knob, twisted—

The metal tore; pain shot through my hand. I looked at my hand. I looked at my palm, saw ripped skin. I had the strength of a Gargantua without the toughness of hide to handle it. I had overcontrolled; now my entropic rate was double, triple normal. My body heat was enough to boil water; and the friction of my touch bubbled paint. Carefully I twisted the door's lock, pulled at the crushed knob; the door moved sluggishly, heavy as a vault. I pushed past it into the hall—and lurched to a stop.

A seven-foot specimen of the Hagroon species stood glowering from a dark doorway ten feet across the corridor.

I BACKED away, flattened myself against the wall. This boy was a factor I hadn't counted on. He was a scout, probably, sent through hours ahead of the main column. I had seen the last of his fellows leave—an arrival in reverse—and watched the portal blink out. On the strength of that, I had assumed they were all gone. But if the portal had been briefly activated an hour earlier, as a test. . . .

Another academic question. He was here, as big as a grizzly and twice as ugly, a broad, thick troll in a baggy atmosphere suit, raising an arm slowly, putting a foot forward, heading my way—

I jumped aside, almost fell, as the Hagroon slammed heavily against the wall where I'd been standing—a wall charred black by the heat of my body. I moved back again, carefully this time. I had the speed on him, but if he caught me in that bone-crusher grip . . .

He was mad—and scared. It showed in the snarling expression I could dimly see through the dark face-plate. Maybe he'd already been down to the portal room, and found his escape hatch missing. Or maybe the follow-up invasion force was behind schedule now; I felt my heart take a sudden leap as I realized that I'd succeeded; I had worked over the suit for an hour, and perhaps another half hour had gone by while I floundered in my slow-time state, building up a personal ice-cap—and they

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hadn't appeared on the scene. I could answer the theorists on one point now: a visitor to the past *could* modify the already-seen future, eliminate it from existence.

But the Hagroon before me was unaware of the highly abnormal aspects of his presence here. He was a fighter, trained to catch small hairless anthropos and squeeze their necks, and I fitted the description. He jumped again—a curiously graceless, slow-motion leap—hit and skidded, whirling ponderously to grab again—

I misjudged my distance, felt his hand catch at my sleeve. He was fast, this hulking monster; I pulled away, tore free—and stumbled as I skidded back, felt my feet go out from under me—

He was after me, while I flailed the air helplessly; one huge hand caught my arm, hauled me in, gathered me to his vast bosom. I felt the crushing pressure, almost heard the creak of my ribs, as blood rushed blindingly to my face—

The fabric of his suit was bubbling, curling, blackening. His grip relaxed; I saw his face, his mouth open, and distantly, through his helmet and mine, I heard his scream of agony. His hands came up, fingers outspread, blistered raw by the terrible heat of my body. Even so, he ripped with them at his suit, tearing the molten plastic from his shaggy chest, exposing a bleeding second degree burn from chin to navel.

I continued my fall, took the shock on my outstretched hands, felt the floor come up and grind against my chin, felt the skin break, the spatter of hot blood; then there was only the blaze of stars and a soft bottomless blackness. . . .

I LAY on my back, feeling an Arctic chill that gripped my chest like a cold iron vise. I drew a wheezing breath, pressed my hands against the floor; they were numb, as dead as iceman's tongs, but I managed to get my feet under me, stagger upright. There were blackened footprints burned against the polished wood of the floor, and a larger black area where I had lain—and even as I burned the surfaces I touched, they bled away my heat, freezing me in a relative temperature comparable to the South Pole in mid-winter.

The Hagroon was gone; I saw a bloody handprint on the wall, another farther along. He had headed for the service stair, bound no doubt for the storage room where the portal had been; he'd have a long wait. . . .

I leaned against the wall, racked with shivering, my teeth clamped together like a corpse in *rigor*. I had had enough of lone

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world-saving missions. It was time for someone else to join the party, share the honor—and incidentally, perform a delicate operation on my malfunctioning—S-suit before I froze solid, fell on my face, and burned my way through to the basement. I turned toward the front hall with a vague idea of finding someone—Richthofen, maybe. He was here tonight. Sure, good old Manfred, sitting at his desk upstairs, giving the third degree to a poor slob named Bayard, hauled on the carpet because some other poor slob of the same name was in jail a few miles away, claiming he was also Bayard, and that the end of the world was nigh. I reached the corner, staggered, feeling the hot flush of fever burning my face, while the strength drained from my legs, sucked away by the terrible entropic gradient between my runaway E-field and the normal space around me. Bad stuff, Mr. B, tinkering with machines you don't understand. Machines made by a tribe of smart monkeymen who regard us Sapiens as little better than homicidal maniacs—and with good reason, good reason. . . .

I had fallen, and was on hands and knees, watching the smoke curl up from between my numbed fingers. It was funny, that. Worth a laugh in anybody's joke book. I clawed at the wall, bubbling paint, got to my feet, made another yard toward the stair. . . .

Poor old Bayard; me. What a surprise he'd get, if he walked into that little room down below, and encountered one frightened, burned, murder-filled Hagroon—a pathetic left-over from a so-carefully-planned operation that had gotten itself lost along the way because it had overlooked a couple of small factors. The Hagroon, self-styled tough guys. Ha! They didn't know what real blood-thirstiness was until they ran up against good old Homo Sap. Poor little monsters, they didn't have a chance. . . .

Down again, and a mouthful of blood. Must have hit harder that time, square on the face. A good thing, maybe; helps to clear the head. Where was I going? Oh, yes. Had to go along and warn poor old B. Can't let the poor fellow walk in all unsuspecting. Have to get there first, still have the slug gun, finish off bogie man. . . .

I was dimly aware of a door, resisting as I leaned against it, then swinging wide, and I was falling, tumbling down stairs, bouncing, head over heels, slow and easy like a pillow falling, a final slam against the gritty, icy floor, the weight, and the pain. . . .

A long trip this. Getting up again, feeling the cold coming

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up the legs now like slow poison, cloud of brown gas, spreading up the legs, across the city; have to warn them, tell them. . . .

But they don't believe. Fools. Don't believe. God, how it hurts, and the long dark corridor, stretching away, and the light swelling and fading, swelling again—

There he is! God, what a monster. Poor monster, hurt, crouched in the corner, rocking and moaning. Brought it on himself, the gas-spreading son of a bear-skin rug! Sees me now, scrambling up, and look at those teeth! makes old Dzok look like a grass-eater. Coming at me now; get the gun out, feel it slap the palm, hold it, squeeze—

The gun was falling from my numbed hand, skidding on the floor, and I was groping for it, feeling with hands like stumps, seeing the big shape looming over me—

To hell with the gun; can't press the firing stud anyway. Speed, that's all you've got now, me lad. Hit him low, let his weight to the job, use your opponent's strength against him, judo in only five easy lessons, class starts Monday—

A blow like a runaway beer truck, and I was skidding across the floor, and even through the suit I heard the sickening crunch! as the massive skull of the Hagroon struck the corner of a steel case, the ponderous slam! as he piled against the floor. I was on hands and knees again, not feeling the floor anymore, not feeling anything, just get on your feet once more and make sure . . .

I pulled myself up with the help of a big box placed conveniently beside me, took three wavering steps, bent over him, saw the smear of blood, the black-red staining the inside of the helmet. OK, Mr. Hagroon. You put up a good scrap, but that low block and lady luck were too much for you, and now—

I heard a noise from the door. There was a man there, dim in the wavering light of fading consciousness. I leaned, peering, with a strange sense of *deja vu*, the seen-again. . . .

He came toward me in slow-motion, and I blinked, wiped my hand across the steamed-over face-plate. He was in mid-air, in a dream leap, hands reaching for me. I checked myself, tried to back away, my hand outflung as though to hold back some unspeakable fate—

Long, pink sparks crackled from his hand to mine as he hung like a diver suspended in mid-air. I heard a noise like fat frying, and for one unbelievable instant glimpsed the face before me. Then a silent explosion turned the world to blinding white, hurling me into nothingness.

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CHAPTER XVI

IT was a wonderful bed, wide and soft and cool and clean, and the dream was wonderful too; Barbro's face, perfect as an artist's conception of the goddess of the hunt, framed by her dark red hair in a swirl of silken light. Just behind the rosy vision there were a lot of dark thoughts clamoring to be dragged out and reviewed, but I wasn't going to get hooked on that one. No sir, the good old dream was good enough for me, if only it wouldn't go away and leave me remembering dark shapes that moved in foul tunnels, and pain, and loss, and the sickness of failure and dying hope—

The dream leaned closer and there were bright tears in the smoke-grey eyes, but the mouth was smiling, and then it was against mine, and I was kissing warm, soft, lips—real lips, not the dream kind that always elude you. I raised a hand, felt a weight like an anvil stir, saw a vast bundle of white bandage swim into view.

"Barbro!" I said, and heard my voice emerge as a croak.

"Manfred! He's awake! He knows me!"

"Ah, a man would have to be far gone indeed to fail to know you, my dear," a cool voice said. Another face appeared, less pretty than the other, but a good face all the same. Baron Richthofen smiled down at me, looking concerned and excited at the same time.

"Brion, Brion! what happened! Barbro's cool fingertips touched my face. "When you didn't come home, I called, and Manfred told me you'd gone—and then they searched the building, and found footprints, burned—"

"Perhaps you'd better not press him now," Manfred murmured.

"No, of course not." A hot tear fell on my face, and she smiled and wiped it away. "But you're safe now, that's all that matters. Rest, Brion. You can think about it later. . . ."

I tried to speak, to tell her it was all right, don't go. . . .

But the dream faded, and sleep washed over me like warm, scented soapsuds, and I let go and sank down in its green depths.

* * *

The next time, I woke up hungry. Barbro was sitting by the bed, looking out the window at a tree in full spring leaf, golden green in the afternoon sun. I lay for a while, watching her, admiring the curve of her cheek, the line of her throat, the long, dark lashes—

She turned, and a smile like the sun coming out after a

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Spring rain warmed me all the way to my bandaged heels.

"I'm OK now," I said, and this time the voice came out hoarse but recognizable.

There was a long, satisfying time then, of whispered words and agreeable nonsense, and as many feather-soft kisses as we could fit in between the other. Then Manfred came in, and Hermann, and Luc, and things got a bit more brisk and businesslike.

"Tell me, Brion," Manfred said pseudo-sternly. "How did you manage to leave my office, disappear for half an hour, only to be discovered unconscious beside some sort of half-ape, dressed like a wanderer from a fancy-dress ball in a variety of interesting costumes, wearing three day's beard, with twenty-seven separate and distinct cuts, abrasions, and bruises, to say nothing of second degree burns, frostbite, and a broken tooth?"

"What day is it?" I demanded.

He told me. I had been unconscious for forty-eight hours. Two days since the scheduled hour for the invasion—and the Hagroon hadn't appeared.

"Listen," I said. "What I'm going to tell you is going to be a little hard to take, but in view of the corpse you found beside me, I expect you to do your best. . . ."

"A truly strange creature, Brion," Hermann said. "It attacked you, I presume, which would account for some of the wounds, but as for the burns. . . ."

I told them. They listened. I had to stop twice to rest, and once to eat a bowl of chicken broth, but I covered everything.

"That's it," I finished. "Now go ahead and tell me I dreamed it all; but don't forget to explain how I dreamed that dead Hagroon."

"Your story is impossible, ridiculous, fantastic, mad, and obviously the ravings of a disordered mind," Hermann said. "And I believe every word of it. My technicians have reported to me strange readings on the Net Surveillance instruments. What you have said fits the observations. And the detail of your gambit of readjusting the portal, so as to shunt the invading creatures into a temporal level weeks in the future; I find that of particular interest—"

"I can't know how far I deflected them," I said. "Just be sure to station a welcoming party down there to greet them as they arrive."

Hermann cleared his throat. "I was about to come to that, Brion. You have yourself commented on the deficiencies in your qualifications for the modification of sophisticated MC effect apparatus—and by the way, I am lost in admiration of the

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suit you have brought home from your travels. A marvel—but I digress.

"You adjusted the portal, you said, to divert the Hagroon into the future. Instead, I fear, you have shunted them into a past time-level of our Zero-zero line. . . ."

There was a moment of silence. "I don't quite get that," I said. "Are you saying they've already invaded us—last month, say?"

"The exact temporal displacement, I cannot yet state. But it seems clear, Brion, that they went back, not forward. . . ."

"Never mind that," Barbro said. "Wherever they are, they are not troubling us now—thanks to your bravery, my hero!"

Everybody laughed and my ears got hot. Manfred stepped in with a comment on the fiery figure.

"A strange sensation, my friend, to meet yourself face-to-face. . . ."

"Which reminds me," I said in the sudden silence. "Where's the . . . ah . . . other me?"

Nobody said anything. Then Hermann snapped his fingers.

"I think I can tell you the answer to that! It is an interesting problem in the physics of the continuum—but I think it can be accepted as axiomatic that the paradox of a face-to-face confrontation of identities is intolerable to the fabric of simultaneous reality. Hence, when the confrontation occurs—something must give! In this case, the entropic stress created in the probability matrix was relieved by the shunting of one aspect of this single ego into the plane you have called Null time—where you encountered the Hagroon as they arrived, and embarked on your strange adventure."

"Your friend, Dzok," Barbro said. "Where is he now? You left him at the edge of the city—but in a time that has not yet come to pass—and never will . . ."

"Right now Dzok is in Olyvia's Napoleonic world, on his recruiting mission. He'll be arriving soon, looking for help. This time we'll be able to give it to him—but he won't need it."

Barbro looked puzzled. "But the Hagroons have invaded his world. . . ."

"I fear the implications of what Brion said regarding the disposition of the discontinuity engine have escaped you, my dear," Hermann said. There was a glint of ferocious amusement in his eye. "From the care with which he timed his operation, I should imagine that the Hagroon shuttle bearing the apparatus of destruction arrived on schedule in the Hagroon world-line—just as the timer ac-

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tuated it. The Xonijeelians have nothing to fear from invading Hagroon. Our Brion has neatly erased them from the roster of the continuum's active menaces."

"Dzok was right," Manfred said sadly. "We *are* a race of genocides. But perhaps that is a law of the nature that produced us . . ."

"The Hagroon world—destroyed? But Dzok was *there*—he had been in the prison cell for three weeks . . ."

Hermann patted her arm comfortingly. "Yes, dear Barbro—we must consider one aspect of this friendly creature's existence to have been destroyed—as was the other Brion; but Dzok had come back, you recall, to a time prior to the removal of the Hagroon world. Even now, as Brion said, he is busily gathering his volunteers—and will return to Xonijeel to find all well."

"I will believe you, Hermann—but I do not pretend to understand."

"He will be a most surprised Australopithecine," Hermann chuckled, "When he hears how events turned out."

"And we must help the poor people of B-I Four," Barbro said. "Poor Olyvia, dreaming of a brighter world, and never to know it, because we selfishly reserve its treasure to ourselves—"

"I agree, Barbro," Manfred said. "There must be a change in policy; but it is not an easy thing to bring what we think of as enlightenment to a benighted world. Whatever we do, there will be those who oppose us. This Napoleon the Fifth, for example; how will he regard a proposed status as vassal of our emperor?"

Barbro looked at me. "You were half in love with this Olyvia, Brion," she said. "But I forgive you. I am not such a fool as to invite her to be our house-guest, but you must arrange to bring her here. If she is as lovely as you say, there will be many suitors—"

"She wasn't half as gorgeous as you are," I said. "But I think it would be a nice gesture".

THERE was a clatter of feet at the door; a young fellow in a white jacket rushed in.

"A call for you, Herr Goering." He said. "The telephone is just here along the hall."

Hermann went out, and we talked, asking lots of questions and getting some strange answers.

"In a way," Manfred said, "It is a pity that these Hagroon were so thoroughly anihilated by your zeal, Brion. A new tribe of Man only remotely related to our own stock, but having high intelligence, a technical culture—"

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Hermann came back, pulling at his ear lobe and blinking in a perplexed way.

"I have spoken to the Net Laboratory just now," He said. "They have calculated the destination of your unhappy party of invading Hagroon, Brion. They worked from the brief trace recorded by our instruments over the period of the last five years—"

"Five years?" several voices chimed.

"From the date on which our present, improved Net instrumentation was installed," he said. "There have been a number of anomalous readings, which in the past we were forced to accept as a normal, though inexplicable deviation from calculated values. Now, in the light of Brion's statements we are able to give an interpretation."

"Yes, yes, Hermann," Manfred urged. "Spare us the dramatic pause-for-effect. . . ."

"The Hagroon, to state it bluntly, Barbro and gentlemen, have been plunged over fifty thousand years into past time by our clever Brion's adjustment to their portal!"

There was a moment of stunned silence. I heard myself laugh, a wild-sounding cackle.

"So they made it—just a little early. And if they tried to go back—they jumped off the deep end into an A-line that had been pulled out from under them. . . ."

"I think they did not do the latter," Hermann said. "I believe that they safely reached the Neolithic era—and remained there. I think they adapted but poorly to their sudden descent to a sub-technical status, these few castaways in time. And I think never did they lose their hatred of the hairless hominids they found there in that cold northland of fifty millenia past."

"No, they are safely marooned there in the age of mammoths and ice; and there they left their bones, which our modern archeologists have found and called Neanderthal. . . ."

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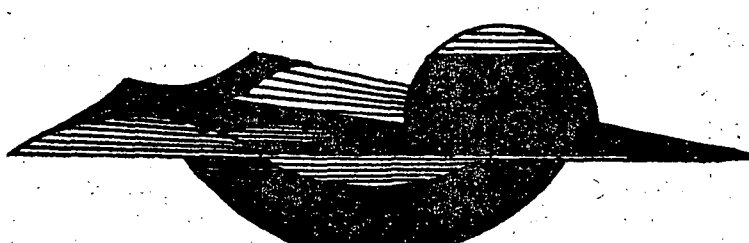

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Across the stage the guenchgrops come, and there the loolbools sit, and wide open are . . .

the little doors

By DAVID R. BUNCH

THE stage had a polished whiteness and the hardness of stone; it was an egg-shaped ball. A green light shone on it for an instant giving the impression that grasses were waving there and perhaps trees at the edges. But one knew really it was but a hoax of the lighting and that nothing was there but the whiteness and hardness under the green illumination. Then the light changed swiftly through all the colors to become merely light, white light that showed the true starkness of the white stage just before the little doors opened.

One did not suspect the little doors. But there they were quite suddenly peeping open, just small breaks in the white, and the loolbools rolling through. The loolbools were egg-shaped, as the stage was, except where their backs were fitted with stairways. They moved toward the center of the stage, not moving on legs or treads, but inching along as eggs sometimes will seem to walk across smooth tables. At the center of the stage they paused, seeming to wait. Was there an appointment?

I did not see the guenchgrops come, saw no doors open. Perhaps they dropped out of some square dark cloud moving over the egg-shaped pavilion above the white stage. They were black and square-cornered. They moved with great agility. I would not say, ever, that they went on legs; rather, for locomotion, they seemed equipped with strange arrangements of notches and squared bits of themselves attached to stringlike extensions. And it was nightmares-for-the-squeamish to watch a guenchgrop go—flipping the squared weights of himself out ahead and following in with himself, easily maneuvering the flexible notches for purchase, haulage of self-winding winches. Oh true, it was food-curdle disgusting for any-

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one to see the guenchgrop, such a mess of black squareness, angularity and ropiness moving so swiftly on the same white stage where the beautiful snow-egg-shapes of the loolbools had floundered and inched in their appearances of great struggle and great innocence. Somehow all sense of ease was violated in this contrast.

From all parts of the perimeter of this white stage called Ogg the square corners raced toward the round bodies that waited in the center. Nearer and nearer drew the black stalkers across the white plains, and the white victims made no move to flee. In truth, one watching closely had almost to suspect that the victims were arranging and clearing their stairways for easy ascent by the notched attackers.

A square-cornered stair ascender came for every white pair of stairs. Throwing the square anchors up ahead the guenchgrops mounted easily. They found at the head of the loolbool stairs a lid on each loolbool body. (Certainly one was hardly prepared for this!) With a small tinkle of white noise the black squarish ones lifted the white lids and looked inside. One almost might say the guenchgrops laughed at what they saw; there was a chatter of notches. Then they threw square bits of themselves in and drew out small marble-shaped stones that, strangely enough, were not white. The stones were of every color, and many were black. The guenchgrops hurriedly threw the stone marbles to all parts of the stage until every marble was quickly out of every loolbool body. Then those squarish black invaders cast all the loose angular bits of themselves down into the loolbools and entered after. The lids of the loolbools all closed at one time with a white-tink sound that was almost not a noise, and the spotless snow-egg-shape bodies, looking outwardly whole and unchanged, moved back through gay marbles, inched their way along until once more they were confronted with gray doors. Through the black holes behind the gray doors they entered the sides of the snow-white stage-plains of Ogg and have never, I confess, been seen again by me. But my soul confronts their speckled children daily!

THE END

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A great boiling mass of grey-brown matter, closing in on tiger's feet:

PHOG

By PIERS ANTHONY

MAT'S eyes widened in shock. He was young; he lacked a foot of the height of manhood; but his mind assessed the situation immediately. A moment only did the spell of the monstrous mists hold him in thrall; then he gave the alarm in the most natural and effective manner: he screamed in terror.

His sister Sal, Nextborn, jumped up, clutching the bright stone she had been playing with. It was a strange flat fragment, diverting them both until this instant, for it showed a hand inside when she picked it up—a hand that went away when she set it down again. And sometimes it flashed blindingly, rivaling Phoebus himself. But it was forgotten now as Sal too saw the horror that was upon them both. Her scream joined his.

Nearby, a gray-whiskered man came joltingly awake, kicking up dark sand as he scrambled to his ancient feet. He was the children's grandfather, their only surviving relative. He was too old, now, to be a worthy guardian; never before had he been lulled to sleep this far within the shadow zone. Somehow the hot safe sun had pacified his fears, putting him off guard—while Phoebus quietly withdrew, shielded by closing mists above, and left the three of them prey to their own carelessness.

His rheumy eyes took in the crying children and the encroaching horror behind them. Already Phog surrounded their position on three sides, sparing only a dwindling harbor of land —an opening they could not hope to pass in time.

"The fjords," the old man cried. "There is no other way!" Grasping each child by the wrist, he lumbered toward the nearest rift.

Sal came willingly—an open-minded innocent who would one day be a lovely woman. Mat held back, frightened by vague tribal

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taboos. "The fjords are forbidden," he whimpered.

The man had no patience with superstition. He cast loose the boy's hand. "Then wait for Phog. Your father did."

Mat looked behind him. The shape was within a hundred paces, silently consuming the distance between them. Its surging hunger was manifest. "Wait for me, Progenitor!"

The fjords were deep erosion-gullies through which the hot winds gusted. Water spumed in some, in ever-shifting patterns, cutting new channels and filling in the old with rocky debris. It was a dangerous region, shunned by most people; but the hazards would also put Phog at a disadvantage. The sharp cliffs would hinder it; the winds would tug at its fringe and tear painful rifts; the turbulent waters below would wash at its tumbling substance, dissolving it. Phog, mindlessly determined, would waste its impetous filling the deep chasms, building itself up to stretch into the farther clefts, bruising itself and wasting time.

Even so, escape was not certain. Their only real hope was to avoid it long enough for Phoebus to return.

PHOEBUS and Phog waged perpetual war, on this forgotten colony of Man. Phoebus, the shining sun, was lord of the desiccate plain, burning down in stationary splendor, driving back every living thing. Phog was guardian of the shadow, denizen of ice and glacier, cover for the dread phogRunner.

Between these powers of light and shadow was a narrow strip of habitable territory, a buffer zone, where rain might fall and green plants grow. Here the tribe foraged for wild grains and fruits and dug into the ground for tubers; here were clear springs for water, and animals for fur. Neither Phog nor Phoebus exercised total influence; and here a furtive, timid tribe could live—waiting, waiting for rediscovery.

"Stay close by me," the old man commanded. "Do not touch Phog!" He led the way down the first gully, sliding on the grit and sand.

Mat hesitated again, at the brink; but behind him Phog closed in, towering, noissome. He clambered down, no longer in doubt.

Phog reached the fjord, gathering and rising up at the edge. It spilled over and rolled down the incline in horrendous blobs. It was cutting them off from the deeper, safer center of the gully!

"Past it!" They stumbled over the loose stones.

A foaming section wrenched

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free and descended, silently obscuring their escape. Sal screamed and swerved, the last to pass, but in time. The dark mass settled in the bottom, filling it up as more piled on from above. There would be no return this way.

Another cloud appeared ahead. Together, front and rear, the ugly bulks expanded, isolating their section of the gully. Above them a beating wall of soiled cloud loomed, a mighty wave just beginning to fall . . .

"The side!" the old man gasped, scrambling up himself.

They reached the top of the ridge between chasms, spattered by a foul shower of froth as the silent wave collapsed behind. From this height the extent of Phog's advance was evident. The solid mist was everywhere, already overflowing on either side. Only Phoebus could save them now—and Phoebus was hiding. There was nowhere to run; the gully ahead ran parallel to the front, and the farther wall was too steep to ascend in time.

Mat's bright mind was prodded to desperate inspiration. "The water!" he shouted. "Swim under—if we can—"

They galloped down the slope, trying to beat Phog to the deep clear water pooled at the lower end. Water extended throughout the fjords a few thousand feet farther down, eventually unifying in a passive lake. If they could reach this first inlet in time, they'd have a chance.

A narrow grey pseudopod blew across their path, cutting them off from the water. It took on the brownish tinge as it thickened. They pulled up before it, dismayed; sometimes Phog almost seemed to strike with intelligence. This, for it, was a strategic masterstroke. They were trapped.

There was no alternative. The mottled burgeonings were almost upon them, bringing inevitable doom. "Through it," the old man quavered. "As quickly as you can. There may be no Runner near . . ."

Concealing his own terror from the children, he plunged into the noxious wall. There was an eddy about him; then he was out of sight, as Phog sealed itself again.

MAT drew up short, unable to make that plunge. Sal, seeing him hesitate, lost her own courage. Their fear of Phog was too great to permit voluntary contact. Behind them a dirty mass slid over the rough slope; in a moment it would settle and draw them under anyway, but they could not move.

"Where are you?" the voice came back, muffled. "Come, come, before it is too late—"

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This time Sal answered the summons, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, holding her breath, and jumping blindly for the terrible wall ahead. It seemed to pulse and quiver with hungry anticipation. Mat, thrust into action at last, grasped her fleeting hand and dove in after her.

He had taken no breath. The choking mist of Phog's substance stifled him, burning his lungs and making his eyes smart. He coughed involuntarily, inhaling more of the foul gloom. But spurred by fear he pressed on, now running ahead of his sister and drawing her with him. He had known she would get lost, on her own; she was brave enough, but not always sensible.

The run was interminable. Phog held them back, smearing cold grease on face and hands, dragging against the body with the muck of nightmare. Sal cried out, a scream of pain and fear. "Come *on!*" Mat gritted, knowing they dared not delay for a stubbed toe. They were almost through; they had to be.

She screamed again, piercingly. Abruptly, horribly, her grip became flaccid; her hand was torn from his grasp as she fell. The Runner had come! Terrified, Mat spurted ahead.

He was out, crashing into his grandfather. They stood together, transfixed by fear.

Minutes passed. The haze above parted; the sun brightened. Phoebus returned, saving them from a difficult swim. But Sal did not emerge.

Phog reared back, pulling together, recoiling from the direct rays. It could not face the sun. A putrid stench rose from it as its outer fringe was scorched; it retreated, seeking shade. Man and boy watched with rapt revulsion as it heaved back from the gully, back from the fjords, sucking itself in like a bulbous stomach.

On the cleared and glistening ground they saw the bones of Sal, broken and twisted and almost clean of blood. Beside them was a single print: the taloned spoor of the phogRunner.

The old man muttered incoherently, the dirty tears dribbling down his face. Mat's eyes were fixed on an object half-hidden by matted hair. It was the stone—the shining stone—that she had treasured. It flashed with the light of Phoebus, a glittering eye, watching him, condemning him to unutterable grief and shame: he who had held her hand, who could have brought her to the edge, to safety, so close, so close . . . and instead had bolted in panic.

PHOG comes!" the old man exclaimed.

Mat looked up, stroking the

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light growth of beard on his cheek, his pulse leaping in anticipation. The confrontation was at hand, here at the spot Phog had routed them so long ago and driven them to misery in the fjords. Here at the place of the colored and shining stones a second trial of strength was due.

His hand rested on a crude stone structure, a box fashioned from heavy blocks, open above with a fibrous mat inside, hanging between two slanted surfaces. Gently, lovingly, his supple fingers traced the rough contour of the edge, as his eyes traced the approaching menace. There was a tremble in those fingers; a doubt in those eyes; but Mat stood firm.

For a moment his gaze flicked anxiously back over the row of structures extending beyond the horizon, each bearing its facing slabs, each set just so, just exactly so. His breath came rapidly; would the strange weapon he had forged from his dead sister's delight actually defeat Phog?

The ghastly billows came, death-gray, malefic, streaked with sordid brown. Corpulent blisters pushed out, expanded, sagged ponderously and were reabsorbed. Not a sound issued from within that sinister mass; only the belching odor emerged to panic the waiting men.

One hundred feet: a mighty bulge slimed over the ground, four times the height of a man, quivering jellylike as though it sensed its prey. Progenitor's bony body echoed that movement in sympathetic vibration. Mat's gorge rose, fouling his throat as he fought for control over his emotions. He had captured Phoebus in the stone, bringing him far across the plain, winging from surface to surface; but would this tiny spark from the sun's domain daunt Phog?

Seventy-five feet: terror lashed his mind, convulsed his muscles; muscles hard from the hauling of great slabs. "Now! Now!" the old man shouted, his voice a high-pitched wail. Mat gulped, shaking from head to knee, but held himself from action. He yearned to yank the curtain away—the curtain that held back the fierce sunlight chained in this final relay; but for the sake of the test he dared not unveil this light too soon.

Fifty feet: the impalpable stuff of Phog bubbled and swirled, exhaling digestive vapors. Mat's eyes smarted; his nostrils pinched together in vain attempt to filter out the alien gas. Behind him, Progenitor coughed and racked, unable to call again.

Mat's hands gripped the warm stone spasmodically—and did not act. Suppose, somehow, Phoe-

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bus had lost his strength; suppose the light only angered the monster . . .

Twenty-five feet: Phog loomed, as tall as the distance between them, curling up into a deadly hood. Phoebus was far far away, beyond help—except for the caged beam. Somewhere inside the awful shroud, uncaged, the insatiable Runner slavered. If the weapon failed—

Mat acted. Hands now fumblingly eager lifted free the fiber shield. Suddenly there was a brightness; a coruscating beam stabbed out and struck the ground ahead. It was a ray of the sun, slinding in the gloom, harnessed by tireless labor during Mat's last foot of growth.

He took hold of the balanced stone, tilting it up. The beam followed, reflecting from the polished surface and marching along the ground, up and into Phog itself. Now—

Phog sizzled and folded into itself, trying to escape that burning light. But the darting lance played over its surface, vaporizing the rank mists wherever it touched.

To one side and the other Phog continued its advance; but before that implacable shaft it retreated, wounded, dribbling dismal white droplets. It was unable to attack.

"It works!" Progenitor cried. "We have defeated Phog!"

Mat answered him with a smile, allowing the old man his share of pride. Victory was sweet indeed.

The light failed.

PHOG rolled back, facelessly gloating. Feverishly Mat cast about, seeking the malfunction, but there was none. The reflectors were in order, yet the beam was not coming in.

He looked up to see Phog fifteen feet distant, offering a putrescent embrace. Within it—were there malevolent eyes?

The beam snapped on. Phog recoiled furiously. Had the phantom shape within been singed. He kept the light fixed on one spot, drilling a hole in the wall before him, while his mind pondered the meaning of that brief cessation. Would it happen again?

The malodorous veil crept up around the beam, leaving a harmless tunnel. Phog was accommodating itself. Quickly he switched the light to another place.

The glow died. Phog sucked together and reached for him. Fifteen feet . . .

"Someone is cutting off the relay!" Progenitor cried.

Of course! The tribesmen knew nothing of the careful mechanisms spanning the plain. They would be out searching for food, wandering carelessly be-

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tween the pylons, intercepting the invisible channel of light.

Anger flushed Mat's face. He had held Phog at bay, had tasted victory over the killer of men—only to be defeated by other people's ignorance. The beam flicked on and off again, as though to flaunt his impotence, and Phog crept up to a hungry ten feet.

"We must go," he called, forgetting the defference due his ancestor. But at the lip of Phog there was no time to stand on ceremony. They ran.

The banks of solid mist were far beyond their position. They were at the nadir of a deep cleft, carved by the light. Phog threatened momentarily to fill in from the sides, capturing them. Even as he ran, Mat made a mental note to provide for the protection of his flank, perhaps with additional relays, if he escaped this time.

Progenitor was puffing hugely, blowing out his white whiskers as he ran. Mat saw that the oldster could not maintain the pace for long. Yet there was no effective or honorable way to assist him; he *was* the grandfather. If only the beam were reliable, they could make a stand—

Phoebus returned, overhead, and suddenly they were safe. What determined the comings and goings of the high wisps that shrouded it and let Phog come? He would have to study this—

Progenitor collapsed by a relay, exhausted. In the distance Mat observed the tribesmen returning, meandering along the line of relays. Rage blotted his sight for an instant; then he began to think.

When the people arrived there was a pile of stones beside the pylon, buttressing the path of the beam but not interfering with it. "Cross here," Mat told the incurious people. "Climb up the rocks, so; then jump over to the other side and step down."

They looked at him and at the steps transcending empty sand, uncomprehending. "Phoebus is here," he explained. "We must keep it safe, to battle Phog." But he saw that he was making no impression. They knew nothing about his beam of light, or the principles of reflection he had devised to control it. They had no interest in anything except hunger and immediate danger and occasional ancestry of infants. Not one of them would consider standing up to the awesome enemy. Docile and timid, they had abdicated the courage and intelligence of Man. Progenitor had warned him of this.

Mat picked up a ragged stone. "If anyone fails to use the steps," he said, "I will smash this against his head."

The nearest man looked at him. The man was larger than he and older. Mat's bravado desert-

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ed him. He did not want to fight; he longed to drop his weapon and flee—as he had from Phog. He was one of the Tribe; he had no courage. If the man crossed the beam . . .

A GIRL was watching him, one he had not noticed before. Something about her bothered him; she seemed familiar. Then it came to him: she was the age his sister would have been.

Shame overcame his dread. The ghost of Sal mocked him in this girl's eyes. Not again would his cowardice sacrifice her body to the Runner. Not again would the bloodless bones rise to haunt his memory.

Mat hefted the stone with new purpose. He pointed to the crude stile surmounting the path of the beam. Apprehensively, the man obeyed.

After that, so did the others. It was plain that they did not understand the ritual of treading over nothing; but they gave way to his greater determination. They did the easy thing; they backed down in the face of a threat, as always.

Never again would he be like them.

Last to navigate the stile was the girl. "You're so brave," she said, smiling at him. "My name is Jul."

* * *

Three relays marched across the land to converge upon the battlefield of shining stones. The plain was pocked with the marks of their excavation, for the rocky formation had tilted deep into the earth, as though to hide its splendor. Many tribesmen had labored under Mat's direction to bring up the flat slabs and cleave them apart to reveal the brightness inside; many fingers of growth had passed while they rubbed and rubbed to accentuate that shine with fine fibers and make the surfaces ready for Phoebus.

Two mighty structures stood at the terminus, each as high as a man could reach. Each comprised two columns bearing a great stone crosspiece, and the two arches faced each other to form a two-sided cube visible for many thousands of feet. Each column was fashioned from highly glossed stones tilted this way and that, and above the crosspieces were perched more polished fragments.

High mists shrouded the sun. "Phog will come," Progenitor said, excited. He was feeble now, too old to forage for himself. He would have died some time ago, had Mat not made the tribesmen bring him food. But the man's advice was valuable; only he and one other really understood what Mat was trying to do.

Abruptly he lifted the protectors from the two relay boxes

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near him. Immediately the bright light leaped forth, illuminating the spaces between the columns and forming a glowing cage in the dust. The effect was magical; but Mat well knew that the shafts of Phoebus traveled from stone to stone in fixed pattern, and would go astray if even a single reflector were out of place. Many times had he gone hungry while he struggled with the balance, tapping the surfaces into place, only to have others jarred out of position. The final adjustment had been interminable—but the cage was ready.

"Phog!" Progenitor announced, shivering. Increasing age had not added to his courage. He watched the distant bank with familiar horror.

Mat dropped the curtain on the relay to his right, and the four shimmering walls blinked out. He doused the left, and the fainter bars forming a roof between the crosspieces vanished. Somehow the cage did not show up well unless there was much dust, and the dust was low, usually. But the test had been successful. "Place the bait," he said.

His attention was distracted by an approaching figure, while the old man struggled with the carrion. Jul was running toward them, her dark hair flying back in pretty tangles as she bounced. She had matured considerably.

Mat turned away, keeping his attention on Phog. Progenitor dragged the meat to the center of the cage area and retreated, panting. It was a task he had insisted on doing alone.

Phog approached from one side, Jul from the other. "Are you going to fight it?" she demanded needlessly.

Mat kept his eyes clear of her beauty. "Go away," he said. He knew she would not.

PHOG arrived. The stench of it blasted out ahead, sickeningly. It swirled around the stone pillars and smirched the bait, burying it in thick scum. It reached across the gap toward them.

"Not yet," Mat said tightly.

Phog advanced almost to their station. The three stood, fascinated by it as always, but no longer panicked. They knew the power dammed in the relays, as the tribesmen did not; this time they stayed to conquer, not to run.

The menacing bladders distended the filthy surface, no less loathsome for all their insubstantiality. The corrupt froth washed almost at their feet.

"It comes! It comes!" Progenitor shouted.

There was a whirring within; a thump from the direction of the cage. Mat yanked away the curtains.

The fierce beams leaped to the mirrors, slicing through the

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murky shape immediately. For the first time they saw the actual progress of the light, as it sprang from corner to corner, vaporizing the reluctant mist between and climbing in a quick spiral. In a moment Phog withdrew in agony; but it left a block of its substance behind, snared by the bright enclosure. The trap had been sprung.

The isolated mass hissed and shrunk as Mat unveiled the third relay and played its beam upon the interior. "We have you now, killer of children!" he cried. Eagerly they watched for the exposure of the scabrous monster that had to lurk within.

The cube of filth sagged into amorphous lumps. The choking stink of it filled the air as it puffed into a bubbling residue. At last it was gone, revealing—

The untouched carcass.

"But it was here," Jul said. "We heard it."

Mat stared in confusion. The Runner *had* been present; the spoor was there. But it had not touched the meat.

"It needs live food," Jul said. "A—a sacrifice."

He should have guessed! Furious, Mat looked at the sky. The upper vapors were thinning; Phoebus would return soon, and their chance would be gone.

Too much hung on this encounter. He could not wait for another opportunity. It would be nearly impossible to bring a live animal to the enclosure at the exact moment Phog came, and keep it there untethered. Tied, the animal would jolt the stones, disturbing the delicate alignment necessary for the cage. He had to act now, while the Runner was watching.

Mat picked up the weapon he had fashioned to cow the tribesmen: a long pointed stone fragment. He doused the beams.

Jul clutched his arm as he stepped forward. "No," she cried. "The Runner will kill you!"

He shook her off. "Progenitor—you must unveil the beams. Take care that you release them together, or it will take flight as it did before."

The ancient looked at him, comprehending what he intended. Phog was already invading the vital spot, forgetful of its recent misery there. Somewhere—was there a whirring?

"No!" Jul cried again, throwing herself before him. "You are brave, you are a leader. No one else can drive back Phog."

He set her aside, more gently this time. "I will kill the Runner if I can," he said. "Only living flesh will lure it into the cage. Then—Phoebus will not let it escape."

Still she clung. "Not you, not you!" She flung back her head defiantly. "I have no strength, no courage. This only can I do—"

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Phog loomed over them, casting out its wispy tentacles. But for the moment Mat forgot it, discovering almost too late what courage was.

This girl—this lovely woman the age of Sal—was asking to sacrifice herself to the Runner, that he might live. He had shunned her as the reminder of his shame, as the sister he had betrayed by his cowardice, so long ago. Now he looked full into the face he had feared, and found there not a ghost but a vital passion, an encompassing love—for him.

He realized that there would after all be other times; that with patience and intelligence he could snare the Runner without risking human life.

An anguished scream rent the air.

"Progenitor!" He bounded to the control boxes, whipping free the restrictive curtains. The dazzling light speared out once more, forming the enclosure. But there was no further sound from the old man.

As Phog retreated, leaving another cube of itself pinioned in the silvery cage, Mat saw that Progenitor's death had not been in vain. There was a frenzied whirring within the enclosure of light. The Runner had been caught at last.

Not alone had Mat borne his guilt. **THE END**

(*Continued from page 36*)

sonal scribbles in notebooks. They knew one thing: You could not make data say what it could not say. They observed and recorded what they saw.

And they had changed the world.

How many times? How often had the world toppled on the solid simple people like Gamby? Well, they had survived. And there was no escaping the existence of this new world of his and Julio's. Just as Newton and Einstein and all those early workers had seen a world and reported what they saw, so must he.

And there would be Gambys, always solid, reliable, a rock upon which a new world, a greater reality could be built. And people like Sandy who were looking for the challenge, the endless battle to dominate a hostile universe.

"Let's go on," Julio said.

He rumpled the boy's black hair. "It's a rough road you and I have still to travel," he said. "Maybe we won't like it, but it's already too late to turn back."

He looked down at the forest far below which had already closed over the debris of the explosion. The blocks were gone, but not the pattern that had created them.

"Come on, Julio," he said taking the boy's hand, as they gained altitude. "Let's go destroy the world." **THE END**

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SILENCE

By J. HUNTER HOLLY

Vreney stood in the center of the tiny room, riveted with shock. Silence, SILENCE! Everywhere was silence. And there was terror in it.

IT smothered him until he ached to grab off the ear-covers and dash through the door to freedom. But he stood his ground in the hush and fought with panic.

He hadn't expected this. He had even forgotten to guess at it.

He paced, trying to catch hold of reason, to shove the terror away before it forced him to abandon his plan and lose the last piece of himself.

Terror. He stopped. In that terror, he slowly realized, there was hope. He focused on that hope, commanding sense to come and be logic.

"The silence frightened me," he thought, and the thoughts were loud in the quiet, "because I didn't expect to hear it. To *hear* it!"

He sat down stiffly. Of course he hadn't expected to hear it. He hadn't expected the ear-covers and the soundproofing to make any difference—not at first. He had thought that from silence to Silence was no step. But it was a step—a giant step. And it proved a proof that was almost too much to bear. The difference between silence and Silence proved that he wasn't deaf! So now the tones weren't dreams anymore—weren't so far away.

He felt foolishly as though he might cry, yet he wanted to laugh. Everything he had lost would return to him, and the full measure more of his hope. It wouldn't take so long now. The retraining wouldn't take so long because he wasn't deaf. *He wasn't deaf!* He didn't need to teach himself to hear, only to unhear. The tangible existence of the Silence proved that, for a deaf man heard no silence.

One day there would be sound. And then—there would be music.

He sat quietly, relishing the hushed roar, not knowing how to put sound or noise into it, and not ready to do it anyway. Marcy's face pushed before his

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mind and he smiled. Little Pru's smile echoed with his, and he recalled the morning when the fantastic events had taken shape.

* * *

He had climbed from bed early and spent his three hours of practice before breakfast. Then he had put his clarinet aside because it wasn't good to practice too long on the day of a concert. He had left the instrument by the Music Meter and gone to find Pru. It was his turn with the child's language lesson, and it was always a good time. He didn't want to miss it.

Marcy had Pru waiting for him. The child sat perched in her chair, and her eyes sparked bright and her tiny teeth set themselves in the center of her smile. Three-years-eight-months-old, and she was the beauty of the world.

Marcy, at the stove, was a little stiff, as she was so often lately; a little angry because he spent so much time pouring over the diaries and old books and dreaming ridiculous dreams. He touched her shoulder and she turned to watch his lips and receive his words. "Where did you stop yesterday?" he asked.

"Page sixty-one, in the red book," she answered, her lips precise as they formed the words. She had won prizes for her clearness of speech formation, and she was proud of it. "Pru can understand the pictures, but she has trouble with the S's and the L's."

"Give me an hour with her and there won't be any more trouble," he said. Her answering grin softened her and he turned away for the child. Marcy re-did every lesson with Pru, afraid that his tendency to form speech sloppily would spill over, but she never denied him the right to teach the child. She knew what it meant to him.

He touched Pru to gain her attention, and formed his lips into a slow, firm, "Good morning, Baby."

"Daddy," Pru's lips formed.

He opened the red book to page sixty-one and showed it to her, pointing to a picture of snow. "Snow," he formed the word.

She was supposed to watch his lips and mimic him. She tried, but the word wasn't true. He demonstrated it again, and still it came out of her tiny mouth lop-sided.

He went on to page sixty-two and the picture of a saxophone. And on and on, and in fifteen minutes time he knew this was a lesson for Marcy to teach. Pru and S's didn't go together.

IT was all exasperating this morning, and he didn't know why. The lessons were usually

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fulfilling times, watching his daughter learn to form words, each new word, well done, a celebration. But this morning it was frustrating. She was three-and-a-half and her communication was still rudimentary. Asking for milk, asking for toys, pointing. Something was lacking and he felt it heavily. Although he shouldn't. Pru was exceptionally bright—far ahead of her playmates. Yet she was so slow.

In the diary he was reading was a page about his great-grandfather's child, and the child's first word. That word had come when the baby was crawling on his hands and knees, before he could even walk. Skipping ahead in the diary, he had found pages describing the clever things that baby had said when it was *two years old.*

There was a vast difference and he knew what it was. He, alone, knew what it was. That other baby had talked in the antique sense of the word. It had communicated with sound—whatever sound was. Pru must learn to lip-read. Pru must learn to communicate through the slow process of copying the formation of words from her mother's lips. That other child had communicated with sound, hearing with its ears, copying with its voice, speaking with tone.

Hearing, Voice, Speaking, Tone—all obsolete words with no explanation. Yet they had once been real.

He reached forward suddenly and placed his hands over the useless ears of his child. And he froze that way, the baby eyes staring into his, deep in question.

A slap on his shoulder turned him around to face Marcy, her anger piercing through him. "Leave her alone," Marcy said. "Keep your theories to yourself. You're going to confuse her—make her think she's different. I won't have it, Tom! I've told you before."

He stood up and away from Pru. "I can't help it. I've read about sound, I've studied it, and I've got to find out what sound was—why we don't have it now."

"All because of that one sentence?" she slashed back. "That bit of junk about the sound of a clarinet? You haven't been sensible since then."

"For Heaven's sakes, I'm a musician! I've spent my life at it. When something rears up to tell me I'm missing the entire object of music—that I'm going at it all wrong—I've got to trace it down. Can't you understand that?"

"No," she answered quickly. "I can't understand your dissatisfaction. You're a fine musician, honored and respected. We have this house because of you. You have fame. Why can't you enjoy

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it instead of torturing yourself with foolishness? Why did you have to start reading your great-grandfather's diaries in the first place? They were around for years and you never touched them."

"Is it foolishness to want to do something when you discover that the main enjoyment of humanity is an empty enjoyment? That every human being on Earth who owns a Music Meter, who goes to concerts once or twice a week, is being cheated out of the true essence of his enjoyment?"

She turned her back, unwilling to accept any more of his arguments. They had been through them so many times. He tried to turn her around again so she could read his lips, but she refused. Then she swung back abruptly, her lips bursting with venomous words. "You're getting a reputation, Tom. Always cornering people and filling them full of your nonsense. If you're not careful the orchestra will let you go, and we'll lose this house and everything we have."

"I'm a Class One musician. They can't fire me."

"They let Harmon go for instability."

"That was different. He missed four concerts in a row. And at the fifth one he was drunk."

"But you're heading for the same thing. Please, Tom," she came close, changing from anger to pliancy, her words puffing out to breathe upon his face, "please be careful. Please let this foolishness go. We have so much together—such a future for Pru. Don't endanger it for an impossible dream. The world is deaf. Everyone knows it and no one cares. We were created deaf—to *be* deaf. Let it alone."

"I wish I could, Marcy," he said. "I only wish I could."

She drew away again, retreating to the stove to hide her exasperation. He knew he should give in to her—help her—but suddenly 'sound' was more important. Even more important than Pru.

AFTER lunch, he went into town, leaving the relative privacy of his country estate, thanking God at every step he took in the city that he could afford to live outside, to share two whole acres with only six other families. As he walked down Maple Street, where his ancestors had lived, he felt the push and shove of the people as a sharp pain in his head. There was only confusion here. Movement. A constant shift of face and vehicle; running, scrambling children; waving, hurrying adults. It made his eyes swim, blinding him.

When he came to the place where the house had stood he stopped and stared at the tower-

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ing apartment building, trying to visualize the spot as it had been before. His great-grandfather's diary marked it all down. A big, rambling house with nine rooms—*nine* rooms—and only one family in them. Only twelve houses on the block. Eighteen children, two dogs, and one cat.

"Heaven!" Vreney formed the word. "It must have been Heaven."

He looked at the street now, and the apartment buildings loomed over him, dwarfing the maples. The sidewalk swarmed with human forms and he counted twenty dogs and seventy-five children, knowing he missed many because of the constant shift in position. Adults wove in and out among them, making a moving blur of humanity. He looked up and there was little sky to be seen between the eight-layered traffic pattern of private helos and fly-jets.

A tug came on his sleeve and he brought his eyes down to meet the saucer-blue eyes of a little girl. She was staring at him intently, waiting for his attention.

"Will you fasten my skate?" her lips asked, the words slightly mis-formed. "The strap broke and I can't find my Mommy."

He bent willingly to help her, then waited for her to look at his lips and read his warning. "Be careful now. Don't fall down and skin your knees."

"I won't. Thank you, Mister."

She skated away and the skates made no sound. Vreney gazed at the hundreds of people, and they made no sound. The sky was full and teeming, but it made no sound.

What was sound? How did you make it? Old books spoke of it, and the diaries were full of it. To his great-grandfather, it seemed to be half of life. There were passages about the dog barking, the mower being so noisy that it disturbed the neighbors, his wife calling, his children singing in church. What was singing?

He didn't know. The words were meaningless, and yet they had touched a deep, sharp spark in him that drove him to find out. Other people read the history books, other people ran across old diaries and letters, and they did not wonder. But it was an emptiness in him and it had to be filled. He couldn't be satisfied with the Music Meter needle anymore. He had to 'hear' his clarinet. He had to hear his daughter sing.

And it was impossible, because as Marcy had told him, everyone was deaf.

"But are we deaf?" he asked himself. "Or is it that we just don't hear?"

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HE walked on briskly, anxious to get out of the milling mass of life, to enter the seclusion of Harry Clemens' apartment. Doctor Harry Clemens. Harry was a bore, but as good a friend as he had outside of his own circle of musicians. Harry might know the answer.

Harry's apartment was small; a city apartment; a cubbyhole among cubbyholes. But it was motionless except for the tall figure of Harry. He stood at the door, balding, pale from the indoor life, and his eyes lit in welcome. "Come in, come in. I'm glad to see you, Tom. And honored."

"Honored?" Tom was surprised. "That's a strange greeting."

"Perhaps so, but I attended the concert last week and no other word will do. When you opened with that Clarinet solo in Rhapsody in Blue—I tell you, Tom, I've seen a lot of others play that, but you were something special. The needle—it was a sight I'll never forget. It thrilled and vibrated, and then swept up and over, and melted there, edging on up like sticky honey. Wonderful! Wonderful. I still get gooseflesh, just remembering. I'm going to throw away my tape of the Chicago Symphony and wait for someone to have the sense to make one of yours."

Tom walked over to Harry's Music Meter. It stood in the most prominent place in the room, the tape cabinet beside it. "A new one?" he faced Harry so the doctor could see the question on his lips.

"Yes. Just delivered three days ago. And believe me, it's great. See—it has an extra needle over here. That needle makes all the difference, although you have to be pretty astute to get the subtleties out of it. It's not just for anyone. You should have one of these, Tom."

Tom eyed the machine. It was big, and contained the usual three needles—the center one recording the fluctuations of the main theme, the left one recording the counter theme, and the right one the accompaniment. The oscillating light that brought them all together was high in the center. Now another needle had been added.

Harry touched his arm for attention. "The new needle picks up the most subtle vibrations—over-vibrations. An artist like you could really get a lot out of it."

"I'm no artist, Harry. I've just found that out."

"That's really modesty."

"No, I mean it. Where is the art in making a needle vibrate?"

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"Not a bit. The stories you get over the televiewer with the trite

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dialogue spelled out under the actors—those are great art compared to what I do. At least the writer has created something. He hasn't just wiggled a needle."

Harry sat down. "You don't wiggle a needle. That's a crude description. You *play*—an instrument."

"But nobody hears it."

"Of course not. Music wasn't intended—," Harry dropped off. "What the devil do you mean, nobody hears it?"

"Before the Music Meters came into existence, what did people do for music? Before there was a machine to record what the instruments were doing, *was* there music?"

"Of course there was. All of the classics come from that period."

"Exactly. But how were they enjoyed without the needles or the pulsing light?"

"I see," Harry sighed. "You're still on that antiquities kick. Still prowling through old books and diaries."

"I am. And I'm worried. Harry, what is the main topic of conversation in the world, what is the main hobby, the main entertainment? Music! Everybody lives and breathes music. And nobody is doing right by it!" He seached for a way to pull Harry's interest into line with his own. "I've found something that should even intrigue you, Harry. You're a doctor—a specialist. Eyes, nose, and throat, with a historical sideline on the human ear. I've read some of your papers on that last subject and I'm worried."

"What was it that was supposed to intrigue me?"

"Music used to be *heard*, Harry. Heard!" He pulled out the notes he had brought and spread them on a table. "Look—each instrument used to be heard—separately. Each had a distinct tone. The clarinet had a tone that was hollow and rounded, sweet and mellow. The oboe was reedy, the trumpet clear and brassy, the violin—."

"Mellow, Reedy, Tone—those words have no meaning," Harry's frown underlined the mockery of the words his lips shaped. "What is a reedy tone? What is a brassy tone?"

"I don't know!" the desperation in Vreney's mind made the words tremble on his lips.

"Then what good are the adjectives?"

"That's what I have to find out, don't you see? I've studied this stuff for so long, Harry. I've read books about sound and about hearing. I know all of the words—about scraping noises, and bells ringing, and frightening sounds, and soothing tones. It's gettng so that every time I pick up my clarinet I feel this

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terrible ache, this terrible need to know how it sounds. Sometimes I'd like to dash it to pieces for not giving me what it was designed to give me. Tone! It isn't just the position of a needle on a scale, Harry. Tone is something more, and I've got to find out what."

"You're crazy," Harry's damning words were quick. "That may seem harsh, but I wanted to shock you. You're spending your time fooling with meaningless words and killing yourself with the plain fact that you can't ever know what those words once meant. If they meant anything. There is a theory that the ear used to be a useful organ, and the theory is based on the same meaningless, unexplained words you're throwing at me. But even if the theory is correct, it's useless, except as history. The human ear has lost its power—if it ever had it—and that is the fact."

"That isn't the fact. Not the one I need. But you have it in your store of knowledge."

"What fact is that?"

"The answer to one question, Harry. Is there any difference between the structure of our ears and the structure of our great-grandfathers' ears?"

HARRY paced away, then swung back so his answer was visible. "I shouldn't tell you. I should throw you out of here right now, because I can see where this is leading. You're building up to an obsession, Tom, and it's unhealthy."

"Forget the diagnosis. Just answer my question."

"All right! The answer is No—there is no structural difference that we can find. Apparently the old boys knew a lot about the human ear. They had it down pat and we haven't added to it. They called it the hearing organ, and from what we know they made use of it. So did the animals of the time. But to us the ear is as useless as the appendix. And Nature is proving it, Tom. I've seen a few cases in youngsters lately where the membrane called the ear-drum is atrophying. Useless."

"And that's what scares me," Vreney said. "I know about that from your articles. But the other—the fact that our ears are still as they were when the diaries were written—that proves something greater to me. The ear is the same, so there has to be another reason for our deafness. And it has to be found before the sense of hearing is gone forever."

"It's already gone. And now you're trying to tell me you're worried about humanity. I know better than that. You only want to hear your clarinet. Deep down in you, it's all a selfish obsession. You want to hear your music."

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"Of course I do. I'm a musician. Maybe it will take a musician to prove the point. Music is important to everybody, so if the point is ever proved, I say it will be done through music."

"But I don't see how you can justify your assumptions about hearing. What are you going on?"

"More old theories." Vreney leaned forward. "I've stumbled on something, Harry, and it could make the difference. The old boys, as you call them, used to have something they labeled decibels—measures of the intensity of sound. They knew the limits of the human ear, how much sound it could stand, how many decibels."

"So?" Harry's lips pursed doubtfully. "What good do decibels do us when we can't hear the sound they measure?"

"One of the scientific books I read, written about 1957, said that people—for instance, factory workers—were becoming deaf to certain sounds. Working eight hours a day with a constant loud sound in their ears was impossible, so they adapted. They grew deaf to that sound. It was blotted from their brain. The ear picked it up, but the brain rejected it. The author of the article was concerned for the future and wanted city ordinances passed to cut down on noise. He mentioned power mowers, planes, industry, car horns—all things he said were noisy."

"I still don't see your point," Harry said.

"Nobody paid any attention. The noise wasn't cut down, only added to, gradually and insidiously. *Our* sky is full of helos and fly-jets, our streets are full of cars, our cities full of factories, our houses full of machinery, our stamp-sized yards are full of power equipment—all things that the article said make noise. There are trains, subways, monorails, jets, mail-rockets, passenger rockets—. Maybe if we could hear, the noise would drive us mad. *So maybe we've made ourselves deaf out of self-protection!* They knew of the danger, but they ignored it, and deafness crept up on them. They never even noticed."

Harry was still for a moment, his eyes far off, caught in the newness of the idea. But he shrugged it off. "Foolishness," his lips spat. "You've got nothing to go on. You're simply guessing. Noise may not be what you think it is at all. You've never experienced noise, so how can you know?"

"It's not noise I want," Vreney barely formed the words. "It's sound. It's tone, melody, rustle, creak, roar, whisper—those are the things I want—and, the notes of my clarinet will give me the key."

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Harry called him ridiculous, and Vreney walked out, a bitter taste in his mouth. He hadn't expected much from Harry, but he hadn't expected ridicule.

HE pushed his way through the crowded streets, wondering where to turn. There was no one—only himself. Determination came to him. Obsession? "Then be obsessed," he thought. "Be crazy, but find your answer."

He let the anger drive him forward until he strode into a store and gave the clerk an incredible order. Materials for sound-proofing. The clerk didn't understand, but Vreney knew he didn't have to understand, just thankful that the materials were still in everyday use although their purpose had long been lost. He would build a sound-proofed room, he would devise ear-covers to shut out every chance of noise, and then he would seclude himself. He might go mad—all the way mad. But there was just the chance that the risk would pay off, that he would soothe his useless ears into peace and teach them to hear again bit by bit. The quiet of the soundproofing wouldn't bother him. He was used to quiet. The loneliness, and the aloneness with the idea was the risk. He would chance it. He would chance anything for the mellow tone of his clarinet.

He made one more stop, striding to the concert hall quickly before the impulse left him. If he was going to do it, he had to do it, he had to do it all the way. He went through the auditorium, wondering at the word even as he walked through it—audi-torium—a "hearing place" that was now as still as death. He crossed the stage and went upstairs, pushed the button that lit the light in Huxtable's office, and entered when the answering "Come In" light flashed.

Huxtable, the Manager, was round; round-headed, round-bellied, and round eyed. Even his smile was round as he greeted Vreney. "Musicians!" he said. "You constantly complain about how much you hate the city, and yet you come in six hours early for the concert."

"I'm not here for the concert. As a matter of fact, I'm not *going* to be here for the concert."

"Oh?" Huxtable was puzzled. "Is something wrong at home?"

"Nothing. I'm quitting, Hux. Quitting the orchestra. If you will give me a leave of absence, I'll be grateful, but I know how you feel about those."

"You're damn right you know! There's no such thing as a leave of absence for a Class One musician, and you'd better remember it. You're the only Class One clarinetist I have. Who could sit in for you?"

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"And who would know the difference? My fluctuations are lost in the others, anyway."

"The people would know. They know the combinations by heart. We're adding a new needle tonight—it was to be a surprise—and if you quit on me—."

"You'll never hire me back," Vreney finished for him.

"That's it exactly."

"And if I told you that the reason I want this time off is because of something more important than the concert, more important than music, even, what would you say?"

"That you're insane."

"That's what I thought. So I'll spare you the bother of listening to explanations. I wish you and the orchestra the best—the best of the least, because that's all you've got."

He walked out of Huxtable's office, knowing he was probably a fool, throwing over his work, his position, his fortune and fame all in one stroke. But it had to be done, so he could try. For if he didn't try, he would burst with the ache of wanting to try. If he never heard his clarinet—the promised tones, mellow and round—then he would never touch it again. His dream would be lost and all hope for humanity would be lost, too. Babies would be born with atrophied organs, and then if the truth ever was discovered, it would be too late. He would go on with the rest, a deaf man in a deaf world, where even the birds heard nothing and sang nothing, where no cat mewed, no dog barked, and bees, if they hummed as the diaries said they did, did it silently.

HE explained it to Marcy, expecting her explosion, and willingly took the anger she flung at him. In one afternoon he had thrown away her home, her future, and her hope for her child. She couldn't see beyond it enough to realize that if he won, he would win it all back two fold. She could only see the present ruin. And so she gathered little Pru in her arms and left him. The looks in her eyes told him more than her words. She was afraid of him—sure he was mad—and she raised up her child and ran.

He sat alone in the kitchen, wondering why he wasn't stunned and heartbroken. But he knew that answer. There was too much to do, too much daring to be dared. And there was the certainty that he would win and she would be back. He couldn't grieve when he felt it was a temporary thing.

The days passed as he made over his bedroom, pounding nails with a silent hammer, putting up the materials that the old books said would guarantee a complete shut-out of sound from

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outside. Then he made ear-covers and tested their efficiency by placing them over the bell of his clarinet and playing music. When his Music Meter needle didn't register, he knew the clarinet was making no sound.

An electronic needle. He had learned to play the clarinet by that needle—a certain degree up was one note, a certain degree down was another. He could fluctuate it with the best. He had spent his working hours playing in an orchestra, one more instrument and one more little machine to add to the whole. Each musician playing to his own private machine, fluctuating before him, and the total transposed onto a giant meter for the audience to watch. Each movement of the needles, each pulse of the oscillating light, was a subtle thing that touched the mind of the watcher and drew him into the composition. What the books said the old people had experienced by "hearing" music, people now experienced by "watching" it. But if he was successful, that would be changed and the glorious tones would return.

Finally, with a mixture of fear and anticipation, he had shut himself into the sound-proofed bedroom and put on the ear-covers, knowing the way would be long and demanding, but willing to endure it if the reward came after it.

He had put the ear-covers on, not expecitng to notice any change, and suddenly he was shaking on the edge of the abyss of utter Silence. Terror had clutched at him and he had almost fled, but then the hope came through and he met the crisis. Now he realized that the silence proved beyond any doubt that he was right. He was not deaf. He was only unhearing.

LONELINESS crept close around Vreney, and to offset it, he clung to the hope of the clarinet. He took the instrument from its case and fondled it, caressing the blackness of the wood and savoring the odor of warm oil seeping into the grain, mingling with the scent of resin and cork. The days passed slowly in the silence until he knew the instrument was becoming too important. His dreams were alive with swaying clarinets and parading trumpets. Musical notes, black on white, shimmered in the backgrounds, and the desperate wanting increased inside him to wildness. Music. Notes, Tones. Pitches. It was too much.

So, keeping the covers tightly over his ears, he went into the other room and brought back the televiewer, then forced himself to watch the programs and read the printed dialogue. He had to keep his mind from the music. He had to wait.

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When the calendar had marked off ninety days of silence, he awoke trembling. He stood in the room, awkward and shaken. This was the moment, and he didn't know where to begin.

He had planned that on the ninetieth day he would remove the ear-covers and blow one note on the clarinet. If his judgement was right, he would hear that note. But now it was too big a step. For if he failed and heard nothing—if the note slipped by him and went silently into infinity—.

He put the clarinet down. He must try something else first.

He took off the ear-covers which had almost become like a part of his head in the three months he had worn them. Stillness met him and he remained motionless, afraid to move lest he should hear.

What could he do? The moment was building to a tension that would explode inside him, but he didn't know *how* to hear.

In a final despair, he flung his hands apart and brought them together, slamming them into each other.

A great crack flared in the room. He shrank back, frightened.

Rallying, he clapped his hands again, and the crack slapped out at him—and the same pressure reverberated in his ears.

"I've done it!" he formed the silent words on his quiet lips. And then he stood there, clapping his hands over and over, cowering every time the noise hit at him, but repeating it just because it was noise.

He was exhausted. He let his arms fall to his sides and waited. What could he do now? How did a person go about making noise? There was a low, almost imperceptible pressure in his ears, and it was minutes before he realized he was hearing his own breath flowing in and out. He opened his mouth and sucked air in and the pressure increased.

"Not pressure," he told himself. "Sound!"

For two hours he stood in the room making noises with his body—breathing noises, clappings, stampings, scratchings, gnashings. It was wonderful. The sounds a human body could make were wonderful, and mysterious. Even a swallow had a special character to it, a sound all of its own.

His eyes fell on the table and the clarinet gleamed at him. He stiffened. If the body could make such marvelous sounds, what could this black instrument do, when it was designed for no other purpose?

He picked it up gently and put the reed over his lower lip. He turned to face the Music Meter so he would know which note he

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was playing, and taking a trembling breath, he blew softly into the hollowness of the instrument, prepared for the fright of the unknown.

Something golden happened. It spiraled out of the clarinet's bell and flowed up the walls of the room—low, soft, and oddly like the taste of honey, sweet and heavy.

"Mellow!" he cried to himself. "This is mellowness!"

The ecstasy of it wrapped him round and he blew the note again, his eyes closed, forgetting the machine. The mellowness glowed out at him, and he discovered that many sounds are heard not in the ears, but in the stomach, in the bones, and in the pulse of the blood.

He moved hesitantly up the scale, and then more boldly, and the notes rippled out, trilled out, screamed out. He let them take him and carry him, command him. Then he stopped, his face wet with tears and his body weak with exhaustion.

HE spent many more days alone, discovering the difference between sound and noise, and relishing both. But he had no one to tell, and the need to share it grew until it, too, had to be met.

He opened his door, wanting to go out and find another human being. But the crash of noise that met him hit him like a fist, blasting in his head. Nothing was distinguishable. It was just a constant cannonade, one shriek piled on top of another, and now he understood the deafness of the time. No baby born with normal ears could ever cope with this. A baby would lose its sense of hearing before it was old enough to remember it had ever possessed it.

He slammed the door and shut the noise away. He couldn't go out in it and take the chance of having his ears refuse him again. But he couldn't become a hermit, either. He had to find some way to go out, to hear, and not go deaf. And some way to make people understand and yearn to hear, too.

Mornings and evenings he played his clarinet, reversing the machine process and learning to understand the succession and patterns of notes that made up music. It was hard to respond to the sounds in the same way he had learned to respond to the tremors of the Music Meter, but he studied and he won. Now he knew what melody meant, what loudness and softness meant. And the day he turned on his tape of an orchestra and faced away from the Music Meter, he was overwhelmed. So many new tones. The clarinet was lost for a while inside the orchestra, but then he singled it out, and tried

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to guess what the other instruments might be.

He found that he had a voice, and although he knew no spoken language, he liked the way the sounds coming from his throat drove the loneliness away.

In the afternoons, he worked, converting his ear-covers into less perfect deafeners, testing them by opening the outside door, and perfecting them to the point where he could hear the noise but not be drowned by it.

Then he went out, accepted the stares of people curious as to the purpose of the ear-covers, and heard the sound of life. He felt pity for the swarming people who were shut off from one of their few senses. He had to help them. He had to convince them that they must cut down the noise, must recapture their ears, and enjoy their birthright before they lost it forever—before their eardrums atrophied and sound went into history.

He knew better than to expect help. He had to go it alone and find something startling enough to shock people into understanding and wanting. Music was the key, as he had told Harry it would be. Music was the pulse of humanity and he must find a way to shock that pulse.

Music. He sat down and pondered it, searching for his way. Music—a great art. People gloried in it, in their ability to enjoy and comprehend it. If he could prove to them that music *had* been an art, but was no longer, that music was simply mechanics now, they would listen. He would smash their false satisfaction and they would listen. But how?

Music and the musician were all-important. He wondered why, actually. In the days when people could hear, music had never been that much. But then they had possessed theatre, there had been lectures, there had been group conversations. There were none of those now. Only the televiewer with its written-out dialogue, and movies done the same way. Music had come to be the center of entertainment. The musician was revered, paid out of proportion, given the right to live on the precious, spacious acres. If he could prove that the musician was not truly an artist —that a machine could do just as well, say—then they would take notice.

And the proof wasn't difficult to plan or to build. A machine loaded with buttons, made from Marcy's many household gadgets; a machine that punched its own buttons at random; a machine that punched buttons that activated and fluctuated three needles. He had it!

He tested it, watching it vibrate the needles and pulse the light in meaningless patterns. It

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was so far from the tones he had been hearing that he wanted to laugh. People would laugh at it, be insulted by it, and do something.

He left his room, keeping his modified ear-covers carefully in place, and looked through the newspaper, checking for the date of Huxtable's next concert. There was one tonight, as there had been one every Monday for ten years. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with a matinee on Sunday. Then, tonight it would be. Tonight he would re-win the world—give ears back to every living thing on the earth—and regain his wife, his child, his position.

He packed up his machine and headed for town. Huxtable had to be persuaded to give him the time before the audience, and Huxtable wouldn't be easy.

HUX was behind his desk when Vreney entered. His eyes weren't friendly as they identified him, but they held curiosity for the heavy box under his arm.

Vreney opened, "Maybe I don't look it, Hux, but I'm crawling."

"To me? Why?"

"For help."

"Hah!" Hux formed the scoff precisely. "Did I say you could come back, even if you crawled? I've found myself a new Class One Clarinetist. I don't need you anymore, Vreney."

"I'm not here for my job. Just for Time. I want time during your concert tonight—to demonstrate my insanity, if that's what you wind up thinking—but time."

"I suppose you've written a new composition."

"No. I've re-discovered something old." Vreney put the box on Huxtable's desk. The Manager was waiting for information, explanation, anything that was forthcoming. "I've learned to hear music, Hux. Mad as it seems, I've learned to hear music. And—."

"Why?" Huxtable cut him off.

"Why?" The question was too simple and too blunt. "Because it was intended to be heard. Because it's a blasphemy against the instruments to transpose them onto a machine."

He told Huxtable about his seclusion, and the miracle of sound. Huxtable didn't understand, but gave his attention. When Vreney was through, Huxtable said, "I don't think I actually believe anything you're saying, Vreney. But if I did—just supposing that I did—what could you do about it? People don't want to hear. They *can't* hear. You're asking them to change their way of life, to desire something they can't even understand."

"But they *must* hear," Vreney formed the words sharply. "I

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can make them want to. With my machine, I can make them realize how futile the Meters are and make them see what they're missing."

"They get enjoyment from music already. How can you convince them that they don't?"

"I can show them what a fool's art music has become. First it will be music, but they'll see that other things go hand in hand with it. The old books talk about the sighs of lovers—and whispers—about cries for help, and joyous singing—about coos of babies, and laughter from children. We're missing half of life, Hux! If you'll let me start with music, the publicity will snowball until something is done."

Huxtable was unconvinced and unimpressed. The words describing sound were archaic nonsense to him. Formed on Vreney's lips, 'whisper' and 'laughter' were alike, missing all the subtleties of sound.

Vreney clutched Hux's arm, forcing the Manager to look into his face and see the depth of emotion, the solemness of his next words. "Please, Hux. I'm not crazy. I've heard my clarinet. I've heard an orchestra. I can't stand to think of all that beauty brushing people by. I can't stand to think of musicians holding the precious tones in their breaths and transposing them into the wiggle of a needle. My machine here can do as well as a full orchestra, and with no hand to guide it. I swear to God, hearing is a holy thing. It's a power of life. And it can't be lost!" He let go of Huxtable and pulled his machine out of the box. He plugged it in. "Let me show you. It's the only way you'll ever understand."

He started the machine. The buttons depressed in their random pattern, the needles vibrated, the light pulsed, and Huxtable watched. His face changed from doubt to interest, and finally burst forth in excitement. He watched intently, eagerly.

Vreney touched his arm for attention. "You do see!"

Huxtable smiled. "I see more than you realize. All right, Vreney, I'll give you your time. Be here by nine o'clock. I'll put you on right before the first intermission." He shook his head, then his hand came out and caught Vreney's in a hard, firm shake. "This is really fantastic, Vreney. It opens up a whole new world."

"I told you it would. All I had to do was show you."

VRENEY entered the stage door ten minutes early, exchanged news with the doorman, then walked to wait in the wings. From his position, he had a strangely skinny view of the big

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Meter fluctuating the playing of the orchestra out to the audience. The people sat rapt, their faces withdrawn, and the pulsing needles and the flickering light struck patterns of emotion through them. Only their eyes were alive and alert, watching the music, unwilling to miss any slight jerk of a needle.

The musicians sat beside each other in a semi-circle as they had for centuries, each with his instrument, each with his talent and skill, and each with his private needle that told him he was playing the right notes.

Vreney was disappointed. With his modified ear-covers in place, he had come hoping to hear an orchestra live—not on tapes, but live and vibrant. He heard them, all right, but distantly, maddeningly, through a din of noise pelting in from the street, from the air above the building, from the inner chambers of the building, itself. The auditorium was a gigantic noise box, and the sound of the music was lost inside it.

He moved closer to the orchestra, trying to force proximity to give his ears the music. It was better. But between passages, between flaring chords, and deep in the quiet parts, the din of the world cut through his mood, and the wholeness of the performance was lost, punctuated by discord.

The orchestra reached the final crescendo, the conductor's baton halted, dropped down, and the music was over. The giant telescreen above the big Music Meter flickered to life, and he watched as Huxtable came onto the stage, his figure transposed onto the screen with a close-up of his face so the audience could read his lips and understand what he had to say to them.

Huxtable introduced Vreney and his demonstration. The people were puzzled, but there was willingness in them, so when it was time for Vreney to step out on the stage, pulling the table that held his machine, he did it confidently. He took his place and began his explanation. He would keep it simple. The fact of hearing would be complicated for these people to comprehend.

He formed the words, "The music you have just seen is a classic—a favorite. The musicians worked long at it and have given us an enriching experience." Nods of approval rippled through the layered faces below him. "They have studied long years and worked long hours to bring us this music—but I say that they are all obsolete! We need no musicians for our kind of music. We need no instruments to move a needle. We need no *music*!"

Startled faces jerked up to the screen, and then searched out

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the live man who was projecting the image. Vreney held his breath. He had shocked them. He had ridiculed and insulted their enjoyment. They were his now.

"We need no music and we have none. Look in your dictionaries. What is music? You have to look under the archaic definition, but I'll tell you what it says. It says, 'Sounds having rhythm and melody'; it says, 'a pleasing, expressive combination of tones'! Do we have these? Do we have sounds or tones? We are deaf, and deaf men need no music!"

The audience was squirming and their eyes were angry. Anger was what he wanted. Shock—anger—understanding.

"This needle is our music," he continued. "And we need no other." He reached to the table and turned the switch that started his own machine. "With no musicians, no instruments, no written composition, I will give you music. This machine is no more than an automatic button-pusher, each button making the Meter fluctuate. It is not art. It is not talent. It is not composition. Yet, watch it!"

The buttons depressed and rose in random pattern, and the needles and the light moved on the big screen. The audience sat back, curious, and then caught up in the fluctuations of the needles just as they had been when the orchestra was making them vibrate. As he saw them rapt, he switched off the machine, keeping them on their high plane of emotion.

"You enjoyed that!" he accused. "You responded to it! And yet *it was not music!* No one wrote it. No one performed it. We've all been fools together, deluding ourselves, holding tight to something that is a lie."

He launched into the major part of his speech, keeping it brief and shockingly to the point, explaining what he had done, what he had accomplished, hoping to break through to them and instill a yearning to duplicate his experience. It had to work.

He concluded, "I know this is too much to comprehend all at once. I only came tonight to open the door, counting on your intelligence to do the rest. When you understand and demand that something be done about this terrible din of noise we live in—when you can hear your child call to you in the night and no longer have to rely on a flashing light—when you can hear the glories of our music—then we can count ourselves human again. Try to understand. Think about it. Please!"

A WEEK passed and there was no great stir. There was publicity, rocketing around the

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world, and there was shock and doubt, but no indication of change. Vreney went out every day, braving the confusion of the city to get the feel of the public mood. The papers were full of WHY? Why should anyone want to hear? What was hearing, anyway? Why sound? Why tone? Why noise?

He could tell them why, but they wouldn't comprehend him. In the land of the deaf, an undeaf man was a slave to his own difference—shut off from communication.

But the general climate was changing. People were talking. They were gathering and questioning and he sensed victory in it.

Hearing was precious to him now, even though the constant din that came through his earcovers was unpleasant. That, too, would change.

Exactly one week from the night of the speech, he strode the crowded streets, smiling, imagining the history that would be written about him, the glory that would fasten to his name. The man who gave sound back to the world. The man who made music.

A crowd was gathered at a main corner, staring up at the newsscreen where magnified words traveled quickly across, making important announcements, giving the latest news. He looked up at the letters and waited until they started again so he could get the drift. They flashed down at him, moving slowly as he waited, then they swept by as he read, unbelieving,

"The Philharmonic has announced the first in a new series of concerts beginning tonight at Symphony Hall. The public is invited to come and thrill to the newest thing in music—the *Vreney Music Maker*. Officials claim that it does away with anachronisms, does away with the obsolete instruments of the past, and will revolutionize the art, cutting costs, cutting rehearsal time. Tonight's audience will witness the first complete performance by the Vreney Music Maker. There will be no musicians, no instruments, just the marvelous machine that is purported to set music free. No two compositions are alike! It is a totally new experience."

The words traveled on, but Vreney turned away, shaking, white. The Vreney Music Maker! The random-button-machine that was to have saved the sound of the world, to save music. It hadn't saved music. It had done away with it!

He threw up his hands, and there in the crowd of excited people, he opened his throat and screamed his despair—desperately aware that he was the only one who could hear it.

THE END

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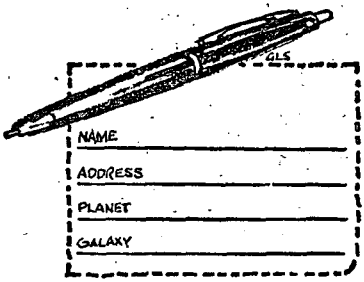

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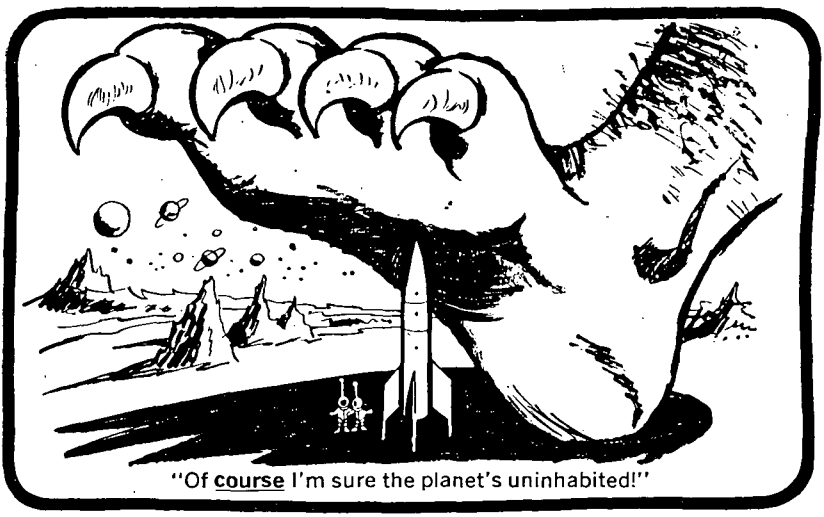

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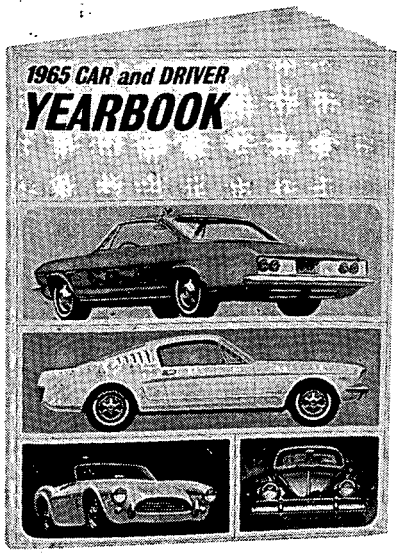

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